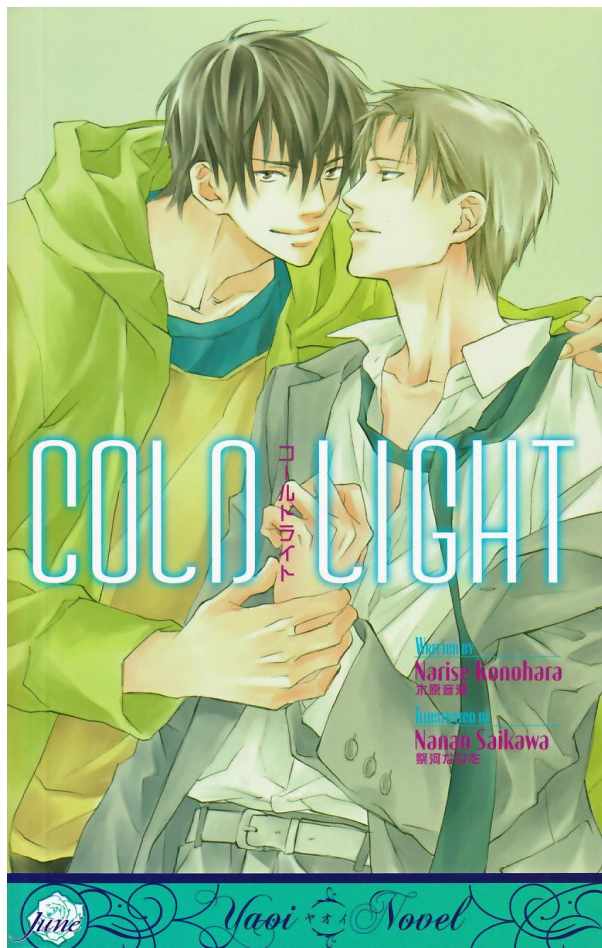




"You keep saying I'll leave you when I get my memory back, but that's not true, I won't," Tohru whispered. "Because I love you. No matter what the me before I lost my memory says, I'll convince him. I'll tell him I love you."



Keishi Fujishima has been released from the hospital, and returns to living with his roommate Tohru Takahisa.

Tohru still hasn't recovered his memories, and he seems to be falling in love with his taciturn, withdrawn roommate. But Fujishima can't forget Tohru's tragic past – and his own responsibility for a large part of it. Will Fujishima and Tohru be able to put the past behind them, and find true love and passion with each other in the present?

The second book in the series that began with *Cold Sleep* finds Fujishima and Tohru establishing a fragile new relationship. Contains bonus stories, including the continuation of the "Class Reunion" story.



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"Stop," Fujishima pleaded, his voice hoarse. He pulled away when he felt Tohru's lips coming closer, but then he was kissed anyway. It was more abrupt and desperate than any other kiss he had ever felt.

Cold Light

The sound of the cicadas buzzing in the backyard was so loud, it was almost annoying. It reminded me that it had also been summertime when Tohru first came to my house. The image of him wearing that faded blue baseball cap, hanging his head and standing by the back door is still burned into my mind.

"I've been trying to remember, but I just can't. Ever since I woke up that day, my mind's just been a complete blank. I can't remember anything." Still lying in the hospital bed, he had lowered his eyes nervously. Of course he didn't remember. Because if he did, there'd be no way he'd be talking to me right now.

"It might be rude to ask this, but what exactly is our relationship?"

It was difficult to explain. Or maybe it was actually very simple. It would be easy to say we were complete strangers. After all, we weren't related and we weren't really friends, either.

He smiled. It was a vague smile, perhaps to smooth over the awkwardness of the situation. As I wondered why he was smiling like that, I realized I hadn't answered his question.

He asked again, "Who are you?"

My trembling hands formed fists as I stood there, dazed. His lips were moving, but it was almost like it

wasn't him. Where did this man come from?

"I can't remember anything..."

What could I do for a man who said that with such a sad face? Nobody would want to tell him the truth—and plunge him into the depths of hell.

I gritted my teeth. I wanted to protect him.

Even if that meant twisting the truth, I wanted to protect you. I didn't want to be a coward and ignore your outstretched hand begging for help. Not again.

"You're my friend."

My lips trembled.

That was the first lie I told you since you lost your memory.

The cherry blossom trees in front of the station were full of bright green leaves that reflected the summer sunlight. The last time Keishi Fujishima had seen them they had hard buds on them, and didn't look anywhere near blooming. As he thought how fast the season had flown by, he shifted in his seat. The sunlight coming in through the car window warmed his cheek.

"What's wrong?" his roommate Tohru Takahisa asked from beside him.

"Oh, nothing..."

"Okay," Tohru murmured. "Oh! You have to turn right there, driver!"

"Oops, sorry about that," the taxi driver said sheepishly. He put his right blinker on and got in the

correct turn lane. Fujishima glanced at his watch. It was a little after 2 p.m.

"Don't you have to go to work?"

Tohru grinned. "I only had to work a half day today. I asked for the rest of the day off."

"Oh..."

He felt bad that Tohru took time off work because of him. Tohru peered at his face and sighed.

"I've been going into work every single day lately. Plus, the old geezer's been working me pretty hard so I thought it was time for a vacation."

Fujishima wondered if he was lying for his sake. But he did feel a little better.

Six months ago Tohru had caused a car accident, and had had amnesia since then. He didn't remember his family, his job at the delivery company, or anything about the accident. He had narrowly escaped death and been hospitalized. After he got out of the hospital he moved in with Fujishima, and started working at a bakery called "Port."

After Tohru's accident, Fujishima sold the company he had inherited from his family. He had to, so he could get enough money to ensure that the accident didn't go to court, and that Tohru wouldn't be charged with any crimes. But Tohru didn't know this; and Fujishima had no intention of telling him.

He was close to securing a more suitable job, thanks to connections he had from his previous one. But right now Fujishima worked at a paper factory—something that had absolutely nothing to do with his last job.

He snapped back to his senses as the driver

slammed on the brakes, realizing they were home. He reached for his wallet, but Tohru was already getting change back from the driver. Tohru took Fujishima's bags and got out of the taxi. He waited for Fujishima to catch up with him.

Fujishima slowly walked toward the entrance of the apartment complex. "Let me pay you back for the taxi." But Tohru shook his head and softly pushed his hand away.

"No, it's okay."

Fujishima still wanted to pay for it, but he didn't have the energy to go back and forth with Tohru, so he put his wallet away. Truth be told, he didn't want to be indebted to Tohru for any reason. He'd felt that way ever since they started living together.

The elevator stopped at the seventh floor with a slight rumble. Tohru got out first and unlocked the door to their apartment. Fujishima hadn't been home in nearly two months, and felt relieved to finally be back.

Even though it was just a normal apartment, deep emotion swelled up in him. He was so glad to be home. He recalled when he had been stabbed, and thinking he was going to die right there.

His wound had healed, yet he thought he felt a sharp pain. He instinctively reached a hand down to his side. The person who had stabbed him was the sister of someone who had died in the accident Tohru caused. She couldn't forgive Tohru because he hadn't paid for his crime of killing her brother. Fujishima had sent money to all the victims' families, but no amount of money could fix the loss of a family member.

The woman had intended to attack Tohru, but Fujishima had jumped in front of him to protect him. He didn't do so intending to die; he just hadn't felt any fear at jumping in front of the sharp blade.

He sat down on the sofa in the living room and sighed.

"Tired?" Tohru asked.

It had only been a fifteen-minute drive from the hospital.

"No, I'm fine."

"You sure?" Tohru put down Fujishima's bags, which he wouldn't allow him to lay a finger on. He disappeared into the kitchen for a little while, and before long came back with some delicious-smelling coffee. Right next to the coffee was a plate with a small cake on it.

"This is to celebrate you getting out of the hospital."

"Thanks," Fujishima said, uncertain of how to react to this unexpected present.

Tohru grinned. Fujishima felt butterflies in his stomach and quickly looked away. Tohru had been giving him that gentle smile a lot lately.

"The old geezer helped me make it."

Tohru often brought home leftover cakes from the bakery for Fujishima, who had a bit of a sweet tooth. But he had never brought home an entire cake before.

He called the owner of the bakery "the old geezer," and was quite fond of him. The owner had offered to teach him everything he knew about baking cakes. It was easy to see why Tohru was so well-liked. He was cheerful,

kind, and it was fun just being around him. He looked much younger than twenty-two, perhaps because of his short hair and casual clothes. It was usually difficult for others to guess his age.

But Fujishima was different. He was somewhat of a loner and it was hard for him to make friends. He didn't smile often, and people often told him he was "expressionless." On top of that, he wasn't a very good conversationalist, to the point where even he got fed up with himself.

He was twenty-nine, so it wasn't like he could just change his personality now. He smiled ruefully and reached a hand out to the plate in front of him. He stared at the cake Tohru had made for him.

The strawberries on top had been cut to look like flowers, and the cake was decorated so beautifully he thought it would almost be a shame to eat it. He turned the plate around to get an even better look when Tohru said, "Hurry up and eat it! If you stare at it anymore you'll see all the mistakes I made!"

"But it's decorated so beautifully. It would be a waste to eat it so quickly."

"Just come on and eat it!" Tohru said, his face red. He looked embarrassed. Fujishima resisted the urge to tease him and picked up a fork.

It was such a pretty cake, he didn't know where to start. He took a forkful off the very edge and put it in his mouth. It smelled like vanilla and the sugary sweet flavor spread over his tongue. As he remembered how happy delicious cakes made him, he went for his second bite.

When Tohru announced he'd gotten a job at a bakery, he had had mixed feelings. He made enough income, so it wasn't like he needed Tohru to get a job. There was no reason for him to work—he wanted him to do whatever he wanted.

Amnesia was a strange phenomenon. Not only had Tohru lost his memories, but even his hobbies and personality completely changed. Before Tohru lost his memory, he always took action first when he didn't like something, and was reckless. And he had been into photography. But now he had no memory of this.

Even though he lost his memory, Fujishima thought maybe some things inside of him were still the same, so he suggested Tohru take some photography classes. But Tohru didn't like it at all. He left all his memories in the past, and now he was doing something the old Tohru never would have imagined—baking cakes.

Feeling Tohru's gaze on him, Fujishima looked up. "What?"

"I was just thinking how pale you are."

Fujishima looked down at his skin, so pale he could see his veins through it. He had been teased about it ever since he was young. He was skinny as a rail, too. He didn't have much body hair and only had to shave every other day.

"I probably look like a skinny white ghost," he said self-derisively.

Tohru widened his eyes in surprise. "No, that's not what I meant!"

Fujishima knew Tohru didn't mean it that way. He just didn't like how feminine and frail he looked.

Fujishima stopped talking, and turned back to the cake. But he couldn't stand being stared at.

"Don't stare at me like that."

Tohru made a strange face. "Why not?"

Fujishima couldn't relax when he knew someone was watching him. And when he thought that person was looking at his disgusting pale skin, it made him even more uncomfortable.

"I like watching you eat."

Fujishima tilted his head.

"It can't be that interesting."

"It is!" Tohru laughed. "You just don't know 'cause you can't see your own face when you eat. But you look *sooo* happy!"

The cake was delicious, and it did make him happy. But he was still embarrassed, and blushed.

"Can you just not look at me?"

"What?" Tohru frowned.

"Please?"

"All right, fine."

Fujishima was relieved. He wondered what his face looked like to make Tohru so interested. He wished he knew, so he would never make that face again.

He felt Tohru's eyes on him. Even though he had just promised not to look, Fujishima knew he was staring at him again.

At first he thought it was just his imagination, but when he snuck a look at Tohru, he found he was definitely looking at him. His fingers trembled nervously. Tohru was staring at him because he was eating. So that meant he should just hurry up and finish the cake. Fujishima



suddenly started eating faster, and in his rush dropped the fork on the floor.

He leaned over to pick it up and heard a *crash!*

"It's okay." Tohru said, moving quickly toward him. Fujishima stared dumbly at the broken plate in his hand. When he went to pick up the fork, he had banged the plate, which was in his left hand, against the corner of the table and it broke.

The rest of the plate and cake were overturned on the carpet. He wondered what he should do and reached a hand out to pick up the cake, but Tohru grabbed him.

"You can't touch it with your bare hands! You'll get cut," he scolded, taking the half of the plate that still remained in his hand. "Let me see." Tohru furrowed his brow and tried to examine Fujishima's hand, his face angry.

"I'm fine. But your cake..."

"Don't worry about it. Come on and let me see your hand so I know you're not hurt."

Fujishima reluctantly held out both hands. Tohru grabbed them by the wrists and peered at them. Finally, he sighed with relief.

"Stop making me worry so much. When I thought you might be hurt again I thought my heart was gonna stop."

Fujishima's heart pounded from the warmth of Tohru's hands grasping his. He pulled away. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Just stay there and sit still."

Fujishima did as he was told and stayed on the couch, hands on his knees. He wanted to help, but he knew he would just do something clumsy and get yelled

at. Tohru put on some rubber gloves and picked up the broken plate, wiping the carpet clean.

After he was finished he sat across from Fujishima, who was a little nervous about the close proximity.

"You get so reckless sometimes it worries me."

Fujishima figured he meant when he got stabbed. "Don't worry about me."

"That doesn't mean much coming from someone who almost died."

"You're exaggerating. I never thought I was going to die."

"Liar," Tohru said accusingly. "If you didn't think you were going to die, then why did you say something that sounded like last words?"

When he got stabbed, he honestly thought it was all over. That's why he told Tohru he could have everything of his. He supposed that would sound like someone's last words.

"Promise me you'll never get hurt in front of me again."

Fujishima thought about this. After seriously considering it, he said, "What if I trip?"

Tohru tilted his head. "Trip?"

"Well, what if I trip in front of you? I might get hurt then."

Tohru pursed his lips and his shoulders began to shake. Then he couldn't take it anymore and burst out laughing.

Fujishima wanted to crawl into a dark hole. He didn't know why Tohru was laughing at him so hard. He didn't think he had said anything that funny.

"I'm sorry. You're just so silly!" He wiped the tears from his eyes and touched Fujishima's cheek. Surprised, Fujishima pulled back. The smile faded from Tohru's face and was replaced by a hurt look. He looked down and sighed. "Do you hate it that much when I touch you?"

"I don't hate it."

"Then why are you pulling away?"

Fujishima didn't hate it. While he was wondering if pulling away could be seen as rejecting him, Tohru said, "Can I touch your hair? You have something in it."

Before he could respond, Tohru leaned forward and touched Fujishima's hair. He put his hand gently on the back of his head. Just as Fujishima realized his face was coming closer to his, he felt Tohru's lips brush against his own.

After they kissed, Tohru looked at him. Fujishima put a hand over his mouth and looked down. His whole body turned beet red. He stood up to get away when Tohru said, "Where are you going?" and grabbed his wrist. "I want to talk to you."

"Later."

"No, it has to be now." Tohru pulled him back to the sofa. He drew Fujishima's hands to his chest. "I want to know how you feel about me."

Fujishima knew he was asking if he loved him or not. This wasn't the first time he had asked such a question. Once during his hospitalization, Tohru had told him he loved him. At the time he was so shocked, he had said the words he thought he would never say to

anyone... "I love you."

After that, ever since he had pushed Tohru's hands away from him, they hadn't spoken about it. That's why Fujishima thought Tohru had come to his senses and realized that loving another man was ridiculous.

"You're important to me..." he answered vaguely.

"I love you, Fujishima-san," Tohru said plainly. "After I lost my memory and started living with you, I thought we wouldn't get along because you're so serious. But when I realized you always think about me and care about me so much...I fell in love with you."

Fujishima couldn't take his eyes off Tohru's serious expression.

"It might be strange because we're both men, but I can't lie to myself." Fujishima's body trembled at Tohru's straightforward confession.

What should he do? He knew he had to say no, no matter what.

Even if he loved him and would give up his own life to protect him.

"I knew I wanted to tell you after you got out of the hospital. Now that we're living together again, I wanted to make things clear. I don't want to be just your roommate. I want to be your lover. I want to live with you here, as lovers."

Sweat broke out on Fujishima's palms. "We can't," he said, his voice pushing from deep in his throat.

"Why not?" Tohru asked. "I love you. And I know you love me, too. Why can't we if we both love each other?" It made Fujishima angry that Tohru could say he loved him so simply.

"If we can't, then I wanna know why. Tell me so I can understand." When Fujishima didn't answer, Tohru got irritated. "Is it because I'm younger than you? That I don't have a good job? That I'm too selfish?"

"No one said that."

"Then tell me why! Because I don't understand!" Tohru shouted, and grabbed him. He hugged him so tightly it was hard for him to breathe.

"Stop," Fujishima pleaded, his voice hoarse. He pulled away when he felt Tohru's lips coming closer, but then he was kissed anyway. It was more abrupt and desperate than any other kiss he had ever felt.

"I always think about you," Tohru whispered. "When I'm having fun I always wish you were there with me."

Fujishima's chest swelled at Tohru's honest words. He shook his head back and forth. An anguished look crossed Tohru's face and he bit his lip. "I just wanna know why."

Fujishima thought over his words carefully, and then spoke. "You've lost your memories. When you regain them, it'll be difficult if we're together."

"Why? Why would being lovers be difficult then?" Tohru pleaded with a stunned look on his face.

"I don't know how you'll get your memories back, but when you do, having a relationship with me will just be a burden."

Tohru looked down and said nothing. Just as Fujishima thought his silence might indicate that he finally understood, he heard Tohru say softly, "You loved me more before I lost my memories."

Fujishima couldn't believe his ears. "Why would you say that?"

"It's true, isn't it? You're ignoring my feelings for you now because you loved me more before I lost my memories! I was more important to you then."

"You're wrong."

Fujishima never considered either of the times spent with Tohru—before or after his memory loss—to be more important than the other. All he wanted was for Tohru to be happy.

"No, I'm not. I can't remember how I was before I lost my memories. But I don't care if I do anymore. I don't need those memories. I'm fine how I am now! I'm right here. Even if I only have six months' worth of memories, I'm right here. And if you're pushing me away now, then what's the point in me even being here? What do you see in me? What do you feel about me right now, when I say I love you?"

Fujishima couldn't answer. He stood up and left the living room, and Tohru didn't follow him. The moment he entered his bedroom, he collapsed behind the closed door, exhausted. Tohru's words weighed heavily on his chest, and now Fujishima didn't even know how he felt.

He thought of what he was sure of. He knew that he loved Tohru Takahisa. Those feelings hadn't changed, even after his amnesia. Both of the Tohrus were connected by a straight line inside of Fujishima's heart. But that wasn't so for Tohru. He didn't understand since he couldn't remember his former self. Tohru only loved the Keishi Fujishima he saw on the surface. If he

remembered the past, he wouldn't feel the same at all.

It was easy to love each other. He could say he loved him and then just push away all his advances. They both felt such pleasure at touching each other, but he knew that the old Tohru would never feel that way.

If only he had some guarantee that he would never remember the past...then he could also pretend he didn't remember, and they could love each other. He could be truly happy. What if he never remembered? In that case, what was wrong with trying to make it work?

Fujishima gritted his teeth and shrugged off the temptation. The problem wasn't whether or not his memories would return. He had sworn that he would never betray him again. What would make Tohru happy wasn't his love, but to do whatever he wanted—to live freely. He had to be the foundation for Tohru's life. He didn't want to do anything now that might embarrass him later when his memories came back. Therefore, he couldn't have a romantic relationship with him. That was how he could deal sincerely with him.

Fujishima covered his face with both hands. It wasn't supposed to end up like this. He just wanted Tohru to be happy, and even if Tohru fell in love with someone else, he was confident he could watch over him and protect him. It was true that he wanted Tohru for himself, but he never thought he needed Tohru's love.

Tohru had hated him. He had done hateful things to him.

He closed his eyes and remembered the stifling past...

Fujishima was the eldest son of Chieko, the eldest

daughter of Shintaro Fujishima, the head of a Japanese indigo business called "Nagiryu" that had been passed down for generations. Shintaro had quite the knack for business, and was the driving force behind Nagiryu, which was famous throughout the country.

When Shintaro was in his mid-fifties, he passed the company on to Chieko's husband, Shiro, and announced his candidacy to become a member of the Diet, achieving a brilliant career change in becoming a politician. With this came even more power, and in the blink of an eye Nagiryu became a worldwide brand.

Fujishima's mother adored her family and the Nagiryu brand. She always wore a Nagiryu indigo-dyed kimono when she went out, and never tanned so her pale skin would always bring out the beauty of the color. She looked magnificent in those indigo kimonos, and when she stood on the bank of the lake in the backyard, she appeared as beautiful and graceful as an iris.

Unlike his mother, Fujishima's father wasn't born into a prestigious family. He married into the Fujishima family and was a quiet, shy man, whose steely gaze could send a chill down anyone's spine.

Not even a year after his parents were married, his father was overseas on business when he was in a car accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair. However, he never let that hold him back, and it filled Fujishima with pride every time he heard someone call his father by his nickname, "The Wheelchair Emperor."

Even though he had endless respect for his father, his father had little interest in him. Every time Fujishima

heard his friends at school talk about how they played with their father or did this or that with their father, he was filled with jealousy. When he approached his father with the childish desire to want to play or talk to him, he knew that he would get scolded for interrupting his work; and when confronted with his father's harsh glare he couldn't say a thing.

Wanting to earn his father's affection and be complimented by him, he worked hard at his studies and at sports. He was a late bloomer, being short and of slight frame, so he had a handicap at most physical activities. So he tried ten times harder than everyone else. It paid off, and his school softball team won the regional championships. He had been so thrilled when he ran to tell his father the good news, but even then all he got was a nod—not one word of "congratulations."

He was in fifth grade when he learned that this silent man was not his biological father. That fall, his mother's older brother Yasuaki Fujishima had died. He had been sickly ever since he was a child and was in and out of hospitals his whole life. All Fujishima could really remember about his uncle was that he was small and pale.

About a month before his uncle died, his mother brought him along to visit him in the hospital. When his mother left the room to get some fresh water for the flowers, his uncle beckoned him to his bedside. A creepy smile was on his gaunt face, and he whispered, "You're the child I had with Chieko."

Fujishima couldn't believe him, so his uncle held out both hands in front of him. "Look at my fingerprints.

They're all whorls. No arches or other lines. Chieko said yours are the same. You and I are the only ones in the whole family whose fingerprints are only whorls."

Even though it was possible for that to happen just because they were related, and it didn't necessarily mean they were father and son, he was so young his mind couldn't think of that yet. At the time he thought that was definitive proof and was totally shocked.

It was wrong for a brother and sister to have a relationship. It was even more wrong for them to have a child together. But even still, Fujishima was born. Something was off, something was very wrong. Plus, his mother had her husband—the man he thought was his father. So why? *Why?* No matter how much he thought about it, he just couldn't understand what had happened between his mother and his uncle.

On the way home from the hospital he tried to ask his mother about the truth many times, but the words just wouldn't come out. He felt like it was wrong to ask, and he was frightened to ask.

After his uncle died, Fujishima kept this mystery buried deep within. Every time his father turned his cold gaze on him, he remembered his uncle's whispered confession. Sometimes he felt like it could be the truth; other times he felt it was complete nonsense. After all, the only father he had ever known was the one in the wheelchair. Now, thinking back on it, he probably didn't want to admit that no one, even those who were related to him, loved him.

But unlike his father, his mother adored Fujishima, like someone who kept a beloved bird in a cage. It took

him a very long time to realize this bird cage was narrow and warped.

Since he was the heir to the family business, Fujishima grew up in a life of privilege most would be jealous of. The Western-style mansion they lived in, including the land it sat on, was large enough to fit his entire elementary school in, and they had many maids and servants.

He was given expensive Western clothes, shoes and toys. But they were all chosen for him by his mother. He hadn't picked out a single one of them. So when his teacher in kindergarten asked each of the students to choose a piece of candy he had no idea which to pick, and instead burst into tears.

His mother told him playing outside was too dangerous, so he was only allowed to play in the yard. When he was a child, his mother's word was law, and he never dreamed of disobeying her.

It wasn't until he was in sixth grade that he realized his mother was different from his classmates' mothers. He didn't receive an allowance, and wasn't allowed to go outside except to go to and from school. If he wanted something, he had to tell his mother, and she would buy it for him. He wasn't allowed to read comic books or play games since she said it was bad for his education. He wasn't allowed to eat sweets except on his birthday because she said it would give him cavities. He was only allowed to watch educational television shows or the news. He didn't remember how the subject came up, but when his friends found out he still bathed with his mother they teased him for having an Oedipus complex.

He had thought it was completely normal to take baths with his mother, so he was shocked when he found out his friends didn't.

When he entered junior high school, he was still short and slight. He no longer bathed with his mother, but she meddled in nearly everything about his life. When he joined the gardening club, she said if he stayed at school too late he'd fall in with the wrong crowd, so he wasn't allowed to attend most meetings. His friends were chosen for him by their family backgrounds. But even still, Fujishima didn't disobey his mother. He never really had the impulse to.

One day when he was in seventh grade just before summer vacation, a letter fell out of his locker. His name was written on the front, and he saw that it was from a girl in his class. Once he realized it was a love letter his heart pounded, and he opened it with trembling hands.

He didn't have any special feelings for this girl, but since it was his first love letter he was genuinely happy. He was happy, but he didn't know how to respond, so he asked his mother for advice.

That night, she brought him to the girl's house. Compared to his, her house was woefully small. As soon as the girl's mother answered the door and brought the girl to stand beside her, his mother slapped the girl on the cheek.

"What are you doing?" the girl's mother yelled, and his mother threw the love letter at her feet.

"Don't you *ever* send another letter like this to my son. In junior high and already trying to seduce boys? You should be ashamed!"

The girl's mother's face stiffened. "Seducing?! That's ridiculous! It's perfectly normal for children their age to get crushes on each other."

His mother laughed. "Children? If she's had her period, she's already a woman!"

Fujishima's face flushed at his mother's words. His mother turned to the girl, who had grown pale, and smiled sweetly. "There are lots of other boys, you shameful little piglet. If I find out you've even *talked* to my son again, you'll regret it."

The girl clung to her mother and started to sob. Fujishima's mother grabbed him by the hand and left. He didn't get a chance to say one word. He had never seen his mother so terrifying. He was so frightened at the words she said and how she slapped the girl, he couldn't even speak. He was so stunned that even when they were in the car on the way home, he couldn't process what had just happened.

"That woman is insane," the girl's mother had whispered as they left. He couldn't get her words out of his mind.

"You poor thing. That letter probably made you so uncomfortable. Don't worry, I've taken care of it. It's okay now," his mother reassured him.

Did the girl really do something so bad his mother had to slap her? All she had done was write that she liked him in a letter. He shook his head back and forth, trying to clear his thoughts. But surely his mother couldn't be wrong, so she must have done the right thing.

In the car, his mother had her arm around his shoulder. Once they got home she said, "Let's take a

bath together tonight." He really didn't want to, now that he was in junior high, but he couldn't say no.

"You're such a good boy," she murmured, pressing his face against her chest and stroking his hair. At this, all the hesitation he felt at bathing together with her vanished. He buried his face in his mother's soft, white breasts.

"Keishi-san," his mother whispered, stroking his hair. "If something strange ever happens to your pee-pee, tell me, okay?" With that, she reached down and grasped it.

"Something strange like what?" he asked, and his mother smiled.

"Anything you think is strange. Your body is getting ready to become an adult, so I have to make sure to keep an eye on it."

Since he thought he had to, Fujishima wasn't uncomfortable being naked in front of his mother. He thought everyone did it. About a month later, he masturbated in front of his mother. As she watched him intently, he remembered wondering if she did the same thing to his father.

Ever since they had gone to the girl's house, his classmates' attitudes towards him had changed. None of the girls in his class spoke to him anymore, and soon that turned into everyone.

Since he was only allowed to have friends who were chosen by his mother, he didn't have many friends in his class anyway. Most of the time everyone just acted like he wasn't there. But now he was being purposefully ignored. He often heard people whispering about him.

People began pointing at him and saying, "Oedipus complex." Usually the teacher was the only one who talked to him, and when they had to get into groups for something, he was usually all by himself. If the teacher told a group to let him in, they always made disgusted faces.

It was painful for him to be in class, so during lunch he went to the library to read. When he was reading, he didn't have to think about all the bad things. He was fine by himself. But it was lonely to be forced to be alone.

Why was he being ignored? What had he done? Was it because he wasn't cheerful or good at making conversation? Sometimes he remembered when they had gone to that girl's house, but since he had told himself that they'd done the right thing, he thought that couldn't be the reason.

He couldn't bring himself to tell his mother that he was being excluded in class. He had a feeling if he did, she would go to the school just like she went to that girl's house.

He couldn't stop thinking about what the girl's mother had said: "That woman is insane." He didn't want anyone else to say that about his mother.

Not much changed in eighth grade. He usually read a book in the corner of the classroom.

One rainy day, a little before summer vacation, Fujishima was waiting for the train when he found a magazine someone had forgotten on a bench. There was a cute girl on the cover. Her eyes kind of looked like his mother's. After he stared at it for what seemed like an eternity, he grabbed it and ran to the bathroom. He

stuffed it in the bottom of his school shoes.

When he got home that night, he carefully cut out her picture from the cover along with a four-page spread of her inside the magazine and hid it deep within his desk. He knew if his mother found out, she'd be furious. She'd say he was a shameful, disgraceful boy. But even knowing that, he couldn't stop himself. That night he had a dream about kissing the cute pin-up girl.

The girl Fujishima had fallen in love with was Chika Saito. Since he didn't receive an allowance, he couldn't buy her photo books, so he looked at them in the bookstores instead.

At some point he found out that she was releasing a CD. He wanted to hear her voice so badly, he went to the music store the day her single came out and peeked at it. But he couldn't hear her voice just by staring at it, of course. After the third day of doing this, he went home to ask his mother for some money.

"What do you want? I'll buy it for you," his mother smiled. But he couldn't bring himself to say Chika Saito's name, so he just whispered, "Never mind." His mother tilted her head questioningly.

"By the way, Keishi, you haven't come to my room in a while."

A shiver went down his spine. Ever since he began masturbating to Chika Saito's pictures, he had stopped going to his mother's room to masturbate. His mother's sharp gaze turned to Fujishima's trembling fingers.

"I've told you again and again that you mustn't do it by yourself, haven't I?"

"I'm sorry," he said, his face turned down.

"Tell me why you've disobeyed me."

There was no way he could say it. He knew she would get angry at him fantasizing about a celebrity. Even though it was the middle of dinner, his mother stood up from the table. "If you can't say it, I will." Her stern voice echoed through the dining room. He hadn't heard her this angry since the night they went to that girl's house. If he said Chika Saito's name she would get angry, but if he remained silent she'd get angry, too. He didn't know what to do.

"Keishi, are you listening to me?"

He looked up timidly. When he saw his mother's terrifying face, he couldn't be silent any longer. He knew he had to spit out the truth. "I-I've been thinking about Chika Saito."

His mother clapped both hands over her mouth and turned ghostly white. Then she said slowly, "And who is that?"

"A celebrity who's in magazines a lot."

"And...what do you do when you think about her?"

"I masturbate."

His mother screamed. Right before the head maid, Tamae, rushed in to see what the fuss was about, his mother slapped his cheek three times. His face stung.

"How, how could you?" His mother paced around the table.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he apologized over and over again, but that didn't do anything to ease his mother's anger.

"Keishi-san, come with me," his mother said, and

grabbed him by the wrist. She dragged him to her room. She made him take off his pants and told him to get on his hands and knees on the bed. He did as he was told. Just then, he heard a high-pitched noise. She spanked his bottom, and Fujishima yelped. She kept hitting him, and he kept yelling and started to cry. That's how afraid he was of his mother's anger and the gravity of his wrongdoing. The excitement he had felt over thinking about Chika Saito soon turned into disgust.

Finally his mother stopped hitting him, and when he raised his wet face he saw that she was crying, too. Fujishima was so overwhelmed he started to sob. He was so embarrassed that he had lost himself to his desire that he wanted to die. His mother began to stroke his hair so gently one would never know she had just been hitting him so violently.

"You're a good boy, so you need to do as I say. Please. I'm doing it all for your benefit, all for you. You mustn't even consider such vulgar girls. When you grow up I'll find a suitable bride for you, so don't worry."

Fujishima nodded, but was unable to stop his tears. His mother looked at him sadly and opened the front of her kimono and knelt in front of him. Her snow-white breasts swayed in front of his eyes.

"You're a good boy...don't cry."

She pulled him to her chest. Fujishima took his mother's nipple in his mouth and began to suck on it like an infant. She stroked his hair lovingly.

Later, she threw the pictures of Chika Saito away. Seeing the shredded-up pictures in the trash can, Fujishima felt more relieved than sad.

After that, when Fujishima wanted something, he no longer asked his mother for it. Because he no longer wanted anything she wouldn't give him. After a while, his desires quietly faded away. It felt better this way.

After he graduated from middle school, things didn't change much. His father paid no attention to him as usual, and didn't even attend his graduation. The morning of his high school entrance exams he ran into his father at the front door, but they didn't speak. His father probably had no idea he was even taking the test that day. But he had a feeling that even had he known, he still wouldn't have given him any words of encouragement.

His father didn't show up to the party they held in his honor after he passed the exam, either. His mother was thrilled and had a pastry chef make him a cake for the occasion. Even the servants were used to the fact that his father was rarely around. It made him feel lonely, but he didn't dare express his feelings out loud. He wondered if the reason his father was so distant was because he wasn't his real child, but of course he couldn't mention that to anyone else, either.

The elite private high school his mother chose for him was his uncle's alma mater. It was close to their house and not many students from his junior high school went on to that school. Since no one knew him, he wasn't bullied as he had been before, but since he was such an introvert he still didn't make any friends.

Sometimes his classmates would talk to him, but since he had only watched educational television shows and news, he didn't have much to talk about and the conversations would end quickly. During breaks he

would pass the time as he had in junior high, by reading. He read the works of Natsume Soseki, Ogai Mori and Yasunari Kawabata over and over again. The love depicted in those books was peaceful and he wondered why real life couldn't be like that.

It was during this time that Fujishima realized that his mother wasn't normal. He learned that no other children masturbated in front of their mothers. But it was hard to break old habits.

After Fujishima thought about it for a while, he went to his mother and told her that lately he had only been getting erections in the morning. Just as he predicted, it was a nuisance to his mother to have him in her room at such a busy time in the morning, before she had even put on her makeup; so eventually she relented and gave him permission to masturbate alone.

Around this time he finally grew taller, but even though his body had grown, his world was still confined to school and his house. During middle school he had been bullied and ignored by girls, but now every once in a while he would get the occasional love letter. He always said he was too busy with his studies, but he thought it was strange that girls who didn't even know him would tell him they liked him. He never mentioned any of these letters to his mother. She didn't know anything about what happened to him at school. He figured if he told her nothing, things wouldn't turn out like they had in middle school.

He would wake up in the morning, go to school, study, come home and study some more and then go to sleep. On the weekends he studied and read books. The

days were so monotonous he thought they would never end—when suddenly that monotony was broken.

About halfway through summer vacation of his second year of high school, he was up late studying for a mock exam. He couldn't concentrate anymore, so he decided to go down to the kitchen to drink some tea. The servants were all in bed by now so he didn't want to bother them.

Just as he got to the first floor, he realized the door to the living room was slightly open and the lights were on. It was past one in the morning. His father always went to bed very early, so he figured it must be his mother. Just as he started to wonder what she was doing, a shrill voice hit his ears.

He stopped in his tracks. He hadn't heard his mother this upset since the time he told her he masturbated to Chika Saito's pictures. The memory of her harsh punishment came floating back to him and he automatically began to tremble.

"I couldn't have had a child with someone as impotent as you!" he heard his mother say through the crack in the door. Then he heard a creaking sound, which he assumed was his father's wheelchair.

"That's right, I can't have children." In contrast to his mother's voice, his father spoke calmly. The word "impotent" repeated itself over and over again in Fujishima's head. "So then who is Keishi's father?"

Fujishima gulped at the mention of his name.

"You got pregnant with him after the accident. So whose is he?" His father's voice was full of emotion and sent chills down his spine. He wanted to know the

answer, but at the same time he didn't. His mother didn't say anything.

"It would be different if he was just some stranger's, but you just can't bring yourself to admit that he's the child of you and your brother!"

Fujishima realized the secret he had been hiding inside himself for so long wasn't a secret to his family. His father and mother knew the truth all along.

"So what's your point?" his mother asked. "It's your fault, anyway. We should have divorced after the accident, but you refused. I wanted to have a baby so badly. I told you that over and over again!"

"And I told you we could adopt."

Fujishima heard the sound of something breaking.

"What's the point of an adopted child? Why would I want to raise someone else's child? I wanted a child of my own flesh and blood—the Fujishima blood! My brother was getting weaker and I knew I had to do something to preserve the Fujishima family line!"

"So you screwed your own brother, who was on the verge of death? You're insane," Fujishima's father spat with contempt. He felt like he was going to throw up. He didn't want to hear anymore, but he couldn't move.

"I thought his father was someone I didn't even know. Until Yasuaki grinned at me on his deathbed and told me himself."

"My brother hated you," his mother said calmly. "He said you had no business acting so conceited since you came from such a poor family."

His father laughed. It was a crazy laugh.

"The only thing Yasuaki had going for him was his family and his upbringing. He had no physical ability or talents and because of that he was jealous of me. The reason your father didn't make him the heir to the family business wasn't just because Yasuaki was in poor health. It's because he was even more useless than me, a cripple!"

The hallway was deathly silent. His mother didn't scream anymore and he didn't hear anything else breaking.

"When I look at Keishi, he's the spitting image of Yasuaki. It's disgusting. And not to mention he's as obedient as a dog, still your little puppet even though he's in high school! He's not your toy, you know. He's a human being!"

"What do you know, you're not even related to him! Keishi's good at school, he's polite—he's a good boy! You're just jealous because I love him! Hmph!" His mother exhaled, sounding like she was nearing the end of her rope. "I wish you had just died in that accident!"

Fujishima's chest ached. He couldn't believe his mother could say something that cruel so easily. He couldn't stand it when he thought how his father must feel hearing those words. He didn't want them to fight anymore, he didn't want to hear any more of this. But he didn't have the confidence to intervene. If he confronted them they'd know he was eavesdropping and he might get in trouble.

"No matter how much you protest, the boy coming here tomorrow is mine."

Fujishima couldn't believe his ears. What did he mean, the boy was his? What boy?

"You must be insane taking a child in from God knows where!" his mother said shrilly.

"You have a lot of room to talk when you forced me to accept a child born from incest! I want you to treat Tohru as you treat Keishi. Because if anything should happen to Keishi, Tohru will take over the family business."

His mother screamed and his father laughed.

"Yes, if a child I adopt takes over the family business, your precious family bloodline will have ended. And some 'child from God knows where' will be the head of the family. It thrills me just thinking about it. I won't be made a fool of by you any longer."

His father's wheelchair creaked loudly, and Fujishima hid behind the stairs. He watched as his father emerged from the living room and returned to his bedroom. Fujishima forgot why he had come downstairs in the first place and hurried back to his room. He returned to his desk, but just stared at the notebook before him. There was no way he could study now. His head was swimming with what he had just witnessed.

His father was adopting a child to get revenge on his mother for having a child with her own brother.

What was wrong with his family? The only thing that mattered was appearances. No one cared about trusting relationships. There weren't any in his family.

He hadn't been created out of love between his parents, but out of egoism. And even though he had been created in such a way, his mother loved him.

She loved him.

He suddenly realized something, and immediately wished he hadn't. Just what did his mother love about him? That the same blood ran through his veins as did hers? But nothing else.

If he was just created out of necessity to carry on some family line, what was the meaning of him as a human? What was the point of him even being alive?

His mother didn't care about who he was as a person; she was only satisfied that her DNA had been passed on. And if what was inside of him didn't matter, what was the point of his life? He balled his hands into fists until they turned white. He desperately tried to fight the emptiness that filled him. Unfortunately it was much greater than him, and overtook his will in an instant.

If he died tomorrow, no one would care. His father couldn't stand him, and even if his mother grieved the fact that her own flesh and blood was dead, she wouldn't care about the person who died. He didn't have any friends to care, either. No one loved him. No one.

Tears fell on his blank notebook paper. Soon they flowed down like a waterfall.

"Help me..."

Who was he asking to help him? There wasn't anyone who could, there wasn't anyone who would. Who would love someone who was as useless as him? He wiped his tears and stood up, walking over to the window. Even though he was just on the second floor, the ground seemed very far away. He wondered if he would die if he jumped from here, but he wasn't sure. He heard the sound of bugs chirping.

Why had he been born?

No matter how sad his sleepless night was, morning still came. His eyes red from lack of sleep, he went down to the dining room for breakfast. Soon after, his mother came in. Her ugly fight with his father the previous night seemed like a dream by the looks of her beautifully made-up face. "Morning," she said sweetly. Fujishima couldn't even look at her.

"Your eyes look red."

He couldn't tell her he had been crying. If he did, she'd ask why, and eventually she'd find out he had heard what went on the night before.

"I was up late studying," he lied.

His mother murmured, "Don't push yourself too hard," with a concerned look on her face and sipped her coffee. "Oh, that's right. I have something to tell you, Keishi-san." She brushed a piece of hair out of her face. "Today a child of a distant relative is moving in with us. He's going to live in the north wing and eat separately from us, so I doubt you'll have occasion to see him, but if you do pay no attention to him. Don't even talk to him. He's not a very good boy."

Fujishima nibbled on his toast. "How old is he?"

"That doesn't matter," his mother said, in a tone of voice indicating there was nothing more to be said on the subject.

Fujishima shoved another piece of toast in his mouth.

His mother took another sip of coffee and left the room, not even noticing her son had hardly eaten any of his breakfast. After she disappeared he ran to the toilet

and threw up. His stomach hurt badly. He returned to his bed and lay down, and after a while the pain subsided. He looked up at the clock. If he didn't leave soon he'd be late for the mock test. But he didn't want to go. He didn't want to do anything. He'd never felt this irresponsible before. He waited until the last possible moment and grabbed his shoes. If he didn't go to school, his mother would want to know why.

He went downstairs, put on his shoes and left.

The test ended in the morning and he arrived back home a little after 1 p.m. He went in through the northern gate. He had been so preoccupied with his thoughts during the test that he honestly didn't remember much of what he wrote. He was sure the results would be horrible.

Sweat dripped down his face as he walked along the stone path. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and looked up to see a small boy standing by the rear entrance. He was wearing a filthy sky-blue baseball cap. His large eyes were staring at him.

He wondered if this was the boy his father had mentioned. He was much younger than he thought he was going to be. When his mother said he was a bad boy, he imagined him to be in junior high school or something, but this boy barely looked like he was in second grade.

He felt sorry for the boy. He wondered if he knew no one would be welcoming him, that no one wanted him. The boy hung his head so sadly, that Fujishima wondered if he *did* know. Fujishima forgot his mother's words of warning and knelt before him.

"What's your name?"



The boy looked up at him. "Tohru Takahisa."

"Nice to meet you, Tohru-kun."

After biting his lip shyly, the boy smiled. Fujishima found himself smiling too, at the boy's cute face. He reached out his hand and patted the boy's head.

"Who are you?"

Suddenly the door slid open, and Fujishima jumped up and ran to the middle of the yard. He had spoken to the child his mother had told him not to.

He didn't know who had opened the door, but he had no way of knowing they wouldn't tell his mother.

He was scared. He was scared of his mother. Because now he knew he only existed to satisfy her whims. Even if it was a false love, he had to play along. Because if he didn't, he wouldn't have even one person in this world.

Fujishima stayed in his room until dinner. He deeply regretted speaking to the child. When he went downstairs, his mother was already at the table. He was so worried she was going to bring up what happened earlier that he could barely swallow his food. Eventually he realized that she probably didn't know. When dinner came to an end without event, he stood up, relieved. Just then his mother said, "Keishi-san?" and his heart skipped a beat.

"You didn't eat much dinner, are you not feeling well?"

He forced a smile. "It's just been so hot lately..."

His mother furrowed her brow.

"I'll have them prepare something more refreshing tomorrow. Even if you don't have an appetite you need

to eat, though. If you don't, you'll get sick."

"Yes, Mother."

He quickly left the dining room. As soon as he reached his room he felt exhausted and collapsed on his bed. He was relieved that his mother hadn't found out, and vowed he would eat dinner normally tomorrow so she wouldn't think anything was wrong.

He suddenly wondered who was feeding the little boy. Ever since Fujishima could remember, his father had eaten dinner by himself in his room, so he wondered if the little boy was doing the same.

The boy was living in a small storehouse away from the main house. Fujishima hadn't been in there very much, but from what he could remember it was a dark, musty place filled with old furniture and other items. He knew it wasn't really fit for a person to live in, but it wasn't like he could do anything about it.

He hadn't seen the boy since the first time by the back door, and his mother had never mentioned him again, so he was almost starting to wonder if he was even still there.

The second time they met was towards the end of the long summer, in the middle of September. There was heavy rain because of a typhoon, which was accompanied by strong winds later that night. Fujishima was in his bedroom reading, but eventually got distracted by the creaking of the windows. He gave up, turned off the lights and crawled into bed.

He closed his eyes, and around the time he counted the fifth sheep he heard a sound like his door was opening. He sat up in bed and turned on his bedside lamp. His door

was slightly ajar. Even if it was his mother or a servant, they would never enter his room without knocking first.

"Who's there?"

No response.

What if it's a thief? he thought, and began to tremble. He realized that he needed to let his mother know, but in order to do that he had to leave the room, which meant getting close to the thief. He held his breath and stared at the open, dark doorway.

He saw fingers clutching onto the door. They were small, thin fingers. Just as he was wondering who it was, the door creaked again and he saw a small figure. The moment he realized who it was, his shoulders relaxed in relief. The figure was still standing in the doorway and wouldn't come in. Fujishima got out of bed and walked towards the boy. He thought he might run away, but instead the boy just stared up at Fujishima with wide eyes. After peeking out in the hallway and confirming no one else was there, he told the boy to come in.

He closed the door behind the boy and turned on the lights, making the boy squint at the sudden change in brightness. His little body was soaking wet and his clothes clung to him. Water dripped from his hair and his sleeves.

"Your name is Tohru-kun, right? What are you doing up so late?" He knelt down before the child and asked this gently.

"I want to talk to Dad," the boy whispered.

"This is the second floor. Dad's room is on the first floor."

His mother's room was also on the first floor, but

his father's room was in the opposite direction. All the servants' rooms were on the first floor, and Fujishima's room was the only one on the second floor. The boy bit his lip and turned away from Fujishima, heading towards the door. He reached out to stop him. It was past midnight.

"If you need to talk to him, you should wait until tomorrow. Dad might already be asleep."

The boy shook his head and said, "I don't wanna wait."

"Why not? You shouldn't wake him up."

Tohru chewed on his lip and shook his head.

Fujishima sighed, and saw tears brimming in the boy's eyes. Tohru put both hands over his face and began to cry. Fujishima panicked and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be mean. I just think Dad's probably asleep by now."

No matter how many times he apologized, Tohru wouldn't stop crying. Fujishima didn't know what to do.

"I want to see Dad!" Tohru yelled, sniffing. Fujishima froze, afraid his mother might have heard him down in her room.

"Please don't talk so loud. Just rest for tonight and go see Dad early tomorrow morning. Then you can talk to him, okay?"

Tohru glared at him. "If the old lady in the kimono finds me I'll get in trouble. She said not to ever come to this house and if I did she'd kill me."

There was only one person in Fujishima's house who wore a kimono. He didn't even want to imagine

how she sounded when she told Tohru this.

"I wanna go home to my mom! I don't like it here!" Tohru sobbed.

Fujishima stroked the boy's hair. Tohru looked up and suddenly hugged him, knocking him to the floor. His pajamas began to get wet, and at the same time he smelled something foul. He couldn't push the boy away because he stank, so he slowly tried to peel his body off of him.

"You want to go home to your mom?" he asked, and Tohru nodded. "I'll talk to Dad tomorrow for you. So go back to your room, okay?"

Tohru shook his head. "I don't wanna, I don't wanna!"

Fujishima didn't know how to deal with him. He couldn't force him to leave. He thought he should probably let him stay the night here, but there was only one bed, and he was as wet as a drowned rat and stunk horribly. He wondered why he smelled so bad, and remembered that even though there was a toilet in the storehouse, there wasn't a bathtub or shower.

He hesitated to ask a child such a question, thinking it might hurt his feelings. "Tohru-kun...do you take a bath every day?"

Tohru looked down and then shook his head.

"When's the last time you took one?"

"I don't remember."

Fujishima paused. "Maybe two or three days ago?"

"I don't know. Ever since I came here I haven't taken a bath and people say I stink," Tohru said in a

quiet voice. Tohru had come in the middle of summer. Fujishima was so shocked he didn't know what to say. This was Japan, not the middle of a jungle. He held Tohru's hand tightly. He looked up.

"Come with me."

Tohru must have thought he was being forced to go back to the storehouse and resisted, so Fujishima said, "You don't have to go back. Let's get you in the bathtub, okay?"

They snuck quietly to the bathroom. Tohru took off his clothes and Fujishima could see that he was painfully thin. While he was washing up, Fujishima sat in the bathroom, lost in his own thoughts. He didn't have to smell the child's clothes to know they smelled almost like they were rotten.

As he listened to the sound of the water, he wondered what he was doing. He had been forbidden to even speak to the boy, and here he was letting him use his bath. He didn't even want to know what his mother might do to him if she found out. But no matter how much she disliked the child, not even letting him take a bath was too cruel.

Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching from out in the hall. He started trembling and his heart pounded. The footsteps stopped outside the door.

"Is there someone in there?" He heard his mother's voice.

"Y-Yes," he stammered.

"Keishi-san? What are you doing at this time of night?"

He desperately tried to remain calm.

"I-I got sweaty so I decided to take a shower."

She probably only paused one or two seconds; but they felt like an eternity.

"All right. I thought I heard someone talking up here, so I came up to see."

"It must have been the wind."

"Well, don't stay up too late," she said, and the footsteps grew distant. Even after he couldn't hear the footsteps any longer, he couldn't get his heart rate back to normal.

He heard a slamming noise and he yelped. The naked boy peeked his head out from the bathroom. He stood in front of Fujishima and looked troubled. Fujishima finally remembered his clothes, but it would be a shame to put them back on after he had gotten clean, so for the time being he gave him a towel from the closet.

While Tohru wiped off with the towel, Fujishima dried his hair. He wrapped the towel around the boy's body and they both returned to his room. And for the first time ever, he locked the door behind him.

"Tomorrow you have to go back to your room, but tonight you can stay here."

Fujishima gave him a pair of his pajamas to wear, which were much too large and had trouble staying up. Tohru nodded.

He turned off the lights and got into bed first. Tohru stood by the window, hesitating until Fujishima called him over to the bed.

Even though the bed was large and there was plenty of room for them both, he felt uncomfortable sleeping with someone else who wasn't his mother.

When he closed his eyes, he began to grow afraid of his own audacity. He had done many things that would upset his mother. If she ever found out, his punishment would be severe. But strangely, he didn't regret what he did much. He didn't think what he did was wrong.

The sound of the wind and rain were so loud, he didn't feel like he'd fall asleep anytime soon. The small body beside him tossed and turned, and finally came closer to the middle of the bed. In the darkness their eyes met.

"This was the only light," Tohru whispered, staring at Fujishima's face. "It was raining so hard and I was scared. It was so dark outside and this was the only light."

He pictured the little boy walking through the darkness in this stormy weather. It probably wasn't easy for him to get to the main house.

"All the doors were locked. But a little window near the kitchen was open, so I climbed in there. I wanted to talk to Dad so bad."

Fujishima patted Tohru's head. "You must have been scared outside in the dark. You were really brave."

Tohru grabbed onto him and cried, "It was so scary, so scary, so scary!" over and over again in a trembling voice.

"You don't have to hold onto me so tight, I'm not going anywhere."

Tohru shook his head and kept his grip. Fujishima tried to soothe him by patting his back. After a while, Tohru's grip loosened and he heard the sound of his breathing slowing as he fell asleep. Fujishima had only

known the warmth of his mother, but that night he learned children were very warm, too.

Early the next morning, he sent the boy back to the storehouse. That night, after his mother had gone out to a dance party, he decided to go to his father's room. He was so nervous that he couldn't bring himself to knock. They hadn't even had a proper conversation in months. And even if he talked to him, he might just be ignored. The thing that pushed him on was the memory of Tohru's crying face in his mind. There was no reason for him to be this unhappy.

He took a deep breath and knocked.

"Who is it?" his father's voice called.

"It's Keishi. I need to speak with you about something."

After a few moments his father invited him in.

It had been many years since he had even stepped foot inside his father's room, and his knees trembled nervously. His father had been reading a book on the large sofa in the middle of the room. There were bookshelves lining the room, and one of the windows was open, making the lace curtains flutter in the breeze.

Fujishima took a step in and froze, unable to go any further.

"I-I need to talk to you about Tohru-kun."

"Tohru, you say?" his father asked, his voice suspicious.

"Please send him back to his mother. It's not right for him to be here, and he said he wants to go home."

His father slammed his book shut, making Fujishima jump. He leaned against the armrest of the

sofa. "Did your mother put you up to this?"

"No," Fujishima denied, but it didn't look like he convinced his father. After a short pause, his father sighed.

"Can you close the window for me? I'm getting cold."

Fujishima did as he was told and closed the window.

"Is that woman gone?"

Fujishima turned around and faced his father. "Mother went to a dance party."

"A dance party, you say?" his father murmured. Fujishima felt a pang in his chest. His father couldn't move his legs. Yet even still, his mother went out dancing every week.

"Have I ever hit you, Keishi?"

Fujishima drew the curtains. "No, sir."

"I don't think I've ever yelled at you, either. So why are you so afraid of me? What frightens you so much? Hmm?"

Fujishima didn't know what to say.

"I thought if you went against her, there might be some hope for you after all. Your life must be so simple. All you have to do is exactly what she says."

A chill went through his body. He knew that he couldn't do anything or make decisions without his mother. Even though he knew that, he didn't know what to do about it. Usually he wouldn't be able to say anything, but today he had come with a specific purpose.

"This isn't what I came to talk to you about," he said in a small voice.

His father raised an eyebrow. "Listen, I don't know what that woman told you, but Tohru can't go back to his parents."

"But I feel sorry for him."

His father narrowed his eyes. "Last month I got a call saying that Tohru was in the custody of Child Protective Services. He passed out at school, and when they couldn't get hold of his parents they called around until they spoke with me. He collapsed because of malnutrition, and apparently his mother had been missing for over a month. He hadn't eaten much during that time." His father reached for a cigarette from a nearby table. "All the bank books and cash were missing from the apartment. I knew she wasn't very responsible, but I never thought she'd abandon her own child like he was some kind of stray animal. I don't care if you don't like the idea of Tohru staying here. But there's no other place for him to go."

Fujishima was stunned. He thought he could solve the situation simply but things had just gotten more complicated. The child had nowhere to go.

"If that's all, please leave. It makes me angry just looking at your face."

A sharp pain raced through Fujishima's chest. Tears welled up in his eyes and he gritted his teeth. "Please don't tell my mother I spoke to you about this. Please," he begged, and then left the room. When he got out into the hallway, the tears spilled from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. It was the first time his father had ever expressed his distaste for him so bluntly.

He heard footsteps nearby. He glanced behind him

and saw Tamae. He quickly went out the back door and into the garden. If she saw him crying, she would want to know why and tell his mother.

The moon lit the garden outside. Twigs snapped beneath his feet as he walked. There were many strewn about from the aftermath of the storm the previous night.

As he walked about in a daze, he realized he had come all the way to the storehouse. It was dark inside. He couldn't bring himself to tell the boy that he had been abandoned by his own mother.

He walked towards the eastern garden, which had always been untouched and wild. When he was little he had asked the gardener about it once, and the gardener said he'd been given orders not to touch this corner of the land. It was probably one of his mother's idiosyncrasies.

As he made his way through the thick brush, he heard a rustling noise. He thought it might be a cat when suddenly a dark figure jumped out in front of him. In the moonlight he saw the little boy. Fujishima quickly wiped his wet face.

"Are you out for a walk, too?" he asked, desperately trying to keep his voice even. Tohru looked up and pointed at him.

"I was going to your room."

Fujishima had promised him he would talk to his father, so he was probably wanting to know what had happened. Fujishima sniffled. "I'm sorry, I wasn't able to see him today. He was really busy with work. I'll try again tomorrow."

"Oh," Tohru whispered, and came closer to him. He grabbed Fujishima's wrist and looked up at him. "Why are you crying?"

Fujishima rubbed his eyes. "N-No reason." Just saying that made the tears flow more. He turned away, but sensed Tohru was still staring at him.

"Why would you cry for no reason?"

Even a child knew the reason you cried was because you were sad.

"A person I love told me they hated me," he said, his chest again filling with sorrow. Tohru patted his hand comfortingly.

"Next time will be different," he said seriously. "I'll pray that next time you see that person they'll tell you they love you."

Fujishima felt like a warm blanket had been wrapped around his heart. Even though this boy had gone through so much sorrow, how was he able to wish for the happiness of others? Fujishima knelt before him and looked in his eyes.

"Thank you..."

Tohru grinned. Then he did something his mother used to do all the time, and stroked his hair. Fujishima forgot the fact that he was a small child and clung onto him.

Tohru didn't move. He stood still until Fujishima stopped crying, not moving a muscle.

That night Fujishima let Tohru stay in his room again. Tohru had wanted to come to his room anyway, and Fujishima didn't want to be alone. They talked in bed, but it was really Tohru doing most of the talking—



Fujishima just listened.

After Tohru fell asleep, Fujishima stroked his soft hair and thought how strange it was that he felt so close to this boy who he didn't even share one drop of blood with. He'd never felt this close to someone before. It was the first time he had felt something like this. It was different from longing for someone to love you, or being loved—he just simply adored and cared for Tohru.

Fujishima and Tohru grew close. Since he was in high school and Tohru was in elementary school, there wasn't much they had in common, but just being together eased his loneliness and he enjoyed listening to Tohru talk.

Fujishima gave him a key to the back door so he could come in at night. If he came in that way he wouldn't have to walk past his mother's room to get to the second floor.

Fujishima's little visitor came to his room every night. Sometimes he would doze off while studying, and when he opened his eyes Tohru would already be in his bed asleep.

He was afraid that his mother would eventually find out, but when he saw Tohru's smiling face he didn't think about that anymore. He had a feeling that Tohru also knew he would get in trouble if his mother found out, because he never came until well after 11 p.m., when everyone else was asleep.

Tohru called Fujishima "Oniichan." He was surprised when he learned he was in fifth grade, since his body was so small. He had thought he was probably only in third grade. When he said so, Tohru got mad and pouted.

At first he was shy, but as the days went by he began to talk more and more. He had lived alone with his mother, who worked nights. One day she suddenly went missing. He hadn't seen his real father once since he had been brought to Fujishima's house.

Finally, after Tohru had been coming to his room for about a month, Fujishima said, "It looks like your mom's not coming back." Tohru listened in silence as he learned he had no choice but to stay. It seemed like he understood that he had been abandoned.

Since Tohru couldn't take baths at the storehouse, Fujishima began to take his late at night so they could bathe together. But before even two weeks had passed, Tamae caught them while they were in the hallway on the way back to his room. He pleaded with her not to tell his mother.

The middle-aged housekeeper easily agreed. She knew there was a boy who was being kept in the storehouse, but hadn't been told any details about why he was there. She brought him food, but was ordered by his mother not to have any other contact with him, and this had been bothering her for a while.

Fujishima asked her to look after Tohru, and Tamae secretly did his laundry, cleaned the storehouse and did anything else the boy needed. When Tohru overslept, Tamae would help him back to the storehouse

so Fujishima's mother wouldn't see him. Even though Fujishima had lived with Tamae for years, this was the first time he learned what a caring person she was.

He was happy to have Tohru's sincere adoration, and the feeling was mutual. He helped him with his homework and gave him some of his old books and dictionaries. When Tohru got good grades on a test at school, it made him just as happy as if it were his own grades.

His mother had been going out more frequently for quite some time now. She said it was to social dances or out with her female friends, but she was gone most nights of the week. But that worked out well for Fujishima and Tohru. When she was gone, they could be as loud as they wanted.

The first winter since Tohru arrived passed, and spring came. Fujishima was now a third-year high school student and Tohru started sixth grade. One day when he was cleaning out his closet, Fujishima found an old indigo kimono. He had worn it when he was little, so he tried it out on Tohru. It fit like a glove. Tohru was thrilled and ran around the room with it on.

"That's a Nagiryu indigo kimono. That's what Dad makes at work."

"It's the color of the end of the night," Tohru whispered.

Fujishima tilted his head.

"Right before morning comes, this is what color the sky is. I want to wear this to a festival!"

Tohru loved the kimono so much he wouldn't take it off. He jumped on the bed with it on, and Fujishima

began to read a book. His heart was racing. They took baths together every day. He was used to seeing Tohru nude, but he couldn't take his eyes off of the pale thighs that peeked out from the kimono. Even though he was a small child, it felt erotic. Fujishima quickly went to sit down at his desk and opened his textbook. The last time his heart had beat like this was when he was obsessed with that pin-up girl...

Even though he hadn't done anything, he felt himself get hard. His face flushed. He couldn't even stand up from his chair. He tried to concentrate on his math homework, and gradually his erection went away. He was briefly relieved, but when Tohru suddenly hugged him from behind, his heart practically leapt out of his chest.

"When you're done will you help me with my homework?"

He smelled the sweet scent of his shampoo. They had just taken a bath together...Fujishima jumped out of his chair and said, "I have to go to the bathroom." He ran from the room, leaving Tohru standing there with wide eyes. He couldn't take it anymore and jacked off in the bathroom. Images of Tohru's soft thighs and the feeling of his arms around his neck swam through his head. After he jacked off a second time, he began to think something might be wrong with him. This wasn't normal. Even though his heart had pounded like this before, he had never gone this far. It wasn't normal to think about a small boy while jacking off.

He was so scared he began to cry. He thought about telling his mother so she could bring him to the

hospital, but if he did that he wouldn't be able to see Tohru anymore. His mother might turn crazy again after finding out he disobeyed her.

After he cried a while he felt better, and returned to his room. Tohru ran up to him, but didn't hug him. He just looked up at him. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah. My stomach...my stomach just hurt really bad. But it's better now."

As Tohru looked up at him with concerned, innocent eyes, Fujishima felt like killing himself for fantasizing about a child.

"Do you want me to have Tamae get you some medicine?"

"Thanks, but I'm okay," Fujishima said, forcing a smile. "Sorry if I scared you."

Tohru hugged Fujishima around his waist. Even though there shouldn't have been anything left in him, he felt himself throb down there, and his heart felt like it would fly right out from his mouth.

"I'll pray that your tummy feels better, too. Pain, pain, go away!" Tohru said in a high, soft voice.

Fujishima peeled himself away as naturally as he could. "Thanks."

Tohru grinned. His face was so adorable Fujishima wanted to kiss it.

That night, Fujishima had a dream about seeing Tohru naked. It excited him so much to see his tiny nipples and his pre-pubescent penis. In the dream he touched his little neck, his chest, and touched his penis. He licked the child's body like it was a piece of candy and kissed him while they embraced tightly like lovers.

When Fujishima woke up from the dream it was still the middle of the night, and he was so shocked he couldn't even speak. His pajamas were wet with cum. Even after he changed, he was afraid to return to bed. How could he sleep next to Tohru when he looked so innocent after he'd had such a dirty dream about him? Fujishima sat at his desk and put his head down on it. He didn't get any more sleep that night.

The more he tried to suppress his desires, the more frequent his fantasies became. He began to have sexual dreams about Tohru every night. He dreaded getting in the bathtub with him. He started needing to jack off well before he got in the tub with him or else he'd get hard while looking at him naked. He was so sad at his actions that he cried many times.

But humans will get used to anything if it happens frequently enough, so after about two or three months it developed into sort of a routine. He still felt guilty, but he no longer cried about it. He couldn't control his desires anymore, and would softly kiss Tohru after he fell asleep. It excited him so much to kiss another male, and on top of that someone as forbidden as a child—that it made him tremble.

Even though he knew it was wrong to want to touch a child like that, he couldn't distance himself from Tohru. He wanted to be with him all day long—he would go to school with him if he could get away with it. He knew that it would be best for Tohru if he backed off, but he was lonely. He would miss him too much.

Autumn came. Fujishima turned in the final list of colleges he wished to attend to his homeroom teacher.

But he regretted it immediately since the business school his mother suggested was at the top of the list.

His mother had always assumed Fujishima would go to business school and then one day take over the family business. But Fujishima had gradually developed an interest in literature.

In books, he found a world full of loving families and relationships he had never known. He would be so jealous reading them that it took him a while to realize how interested he was in literature itself. It was the first time it felt good to learn something not just to get a good grade, but out of pure interest. Even though he knew what he wanted to study, there was no way he could bring it up to his mother. That would mean disobeying her, and he had no idea how she might react. After thinking about it long and hard, he finally came to a decision. He would ask her if he could major in literature, but after he graduated he would still take over his father's company and study business.

He decided to bet on the slight chance that his mother would allow him to do so. One night after dinner his mother was enjoying a cup of coffee in the living room and he went to ask her. After he finally expressed his desires to her, he sighed, relieved. His mother had listened to him quietly, then smiled.

"You can read books in your free time," she said simply, and turned her attention back to her magazine.

"But..." Fujishima started to say.

His mother glared at him. "Are you going to argue with me?"

Her harsh voice sent chills down his spine. "No..."

he murmured, and couldn't say anything more.

When he was forced to give up something he loved, he always went through the same process. It was just like a burning fire. If he gave up hope on any possibility, just like not adding more fuel to a fire, it would eventually burn out and turn to ash. But this time was different. He had to tell himself again and again that there was nothing to be done about it.

That day, Tohru didn't say much. Maybe he had guessed that Fujishima was feeling down, and it made Fujishima happy to have someone so concerned about him.

After they got in bed, Fujishima couldn't sleep. He turned on the lamp, thinking he would read a book. But instead he looked at the child's face beside him. His mouth was half-open. Even though he had to give up his dream of studying literature, he wouldn't give up Tohru. He always wanted to be with him, he always wanted him to comfort him when he was sad. He was the only one who truly cared about him.

While he stroked his hair, strong feelings began to well up inside of him. Tohru mumbled and turned over in his sleep. The arm that poked out from the sheet was still tanned from swimming at the school pool every day during the summer.

They had gone to a festival together that summer, too. Until that point, Fujishima had only ever been to a festival with his mother. She hadn't allowed him to go with friends, of course. That night, his mother had dressed up and gone out. After they were sure she was gone, Tamae helped them both into indigo kimonos and

they snuck out of the mansion.

Tohru was thrilled, and pulled him through the brightly-lit streets. Earlier Fujishima had thought it was a pity that he wouldn't be able to buy him anything at the festival since he didn't receive an allowance, so he took some old books of his to a used bookstore and got a little bit of cash. With that he bought them ice cream, and they scooped goldfish at the festival. The man at the goldfish stall asked, "You two brothers?" to which Tohru happily replied, "Yep!"

Now, he wanted to take all of him in. He wanted all of him. The desire that welled up from down there started coloring his head and his heart black. Fujishima hovered over Tohru and touched his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. After one taboo had been breached, it was like opening the floodgates. After he kissed the boy's lips, he pulled up his pajama top. He touched his small pink nipples with his fingertips, not even stopping when the boy groggily opened his eyes.

"What...?" Tohru said, flailing his arms and legs in the darkness.

"Shh...be a good boy," Fujishima said soothingly. his voice rough. "You're a good boy, so just be still..."

He pulled down Tohru's pajama pants and his underwear. He wanted Tohru's small, soft penis that lay against his thigh. Fujishima grasped it with his right hand.

"No, don't touch me!" Tohru said, upset.

"Just let me do it a little..."

Suddenly he felt a sharp impact to his stomach and he fell off the bed. He grabbed his stomach. The

pain settled down a little, and when he looked up he saw Tohru trembling on the bed. He was clutching his pajama pants and sobbing. The moment Fujishima saw the tears rolling from his large eyes, he finally realized the gravity of his crime.

"I-I'm sorry..." he said, approaching Tohru, but the boy backed away, frightened. "I won't do it again, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Tohru leapt out of bed and ran out into the hallway. He slammed the door shut and the sound of his footsteps grew farther away. Fujishima wanted to chase after him, but he could barely stand. Because the frightening impulse that had seized him still remained, hot between his legs.

What a terrible person he was. Tohru was only in elementary school—he never should have done that. He might hate him, and what would he do if that happened?

He stared off into space when he heard a knock on his door. He thought it might be Tohru and ran towards the door. But it wasn't the small boy who stood out in the hallway.

"I heard someone running down the hallway. Was it you?" his mother asked, a stern look on her face.

"No," he replied without hesitating.

"All right, then. Good night." His mother left.

Fujishima crawled back into bed, regret encompassing him. But no matter how much he regretted it, he couldn't take back his actions. He'd have to beg Tohru for his forgiveness. He'd do anything to get him to forgive him. And if that meant that he could never touch

him again, so be it. He'd be happy just being with him. Because Tohru was the first thing *he* had chosen. It was the first thing he chose for himself because he wanted it, independent of his mother. He was irreplaceable. No matter what, he couldn't lose him.

In the morning, Fujishima went to school as usual. His chest felt heavy. His mother was going to a dance that night so she wouldn't be home. That meant he could go apologize to Tohru.

He wasn't sure how he was going to go about it. He put so much thought into it, he couldn't concentrate on his studies. After school, he hurried back home. It would be best to apologize to Tohru after his mother left, but he couldn't wait that long. Instead of going in through the front gate, he went in through the north gate—it was closer to the storehouse.

As he wondered if Tohru was home from school yet, he smelled something burning and heard a sharp noise. He saw grey smoke coming from beyond the thicket. He thought the house might be on fire and hurried to the source of the smoke. He heard someone sobbing and saw something that made him catch his breath in his throat.

Something was burning on the lawn. His mother stood beyond the fire and she was hitting something small by her feet over and over again with the bamboo broom Tamae used to sweep the sidewalks. Fujishima realized the small thing was Tohru and ran over to them.

"What are you doing, Mother?"

His mother was hitting Tohru's small back with as much force as she could muster. Her hair was disheveled

and she didn't hear her son talking to her.

Fujishima grabbed her right hand. "Please stop!"

Unable to use her hand, his mother finally came back to herself. She blinked her eyes, wiped the sweat from her brow and sighed. "Oh, welcome home, Keishi-san." She fixed her hair and smiled. "Don't stay out here, go inside."

"But..."

"Are you going to argue with me?" she screamed in a hysterical voice. Her beautiful face twisted in an instant as she glared at him. The memory of her spanking him in middle school came back to him and he began to tremble.

The cowering child looked up and their eyes met. Tohru ran over to Fujishima and clutched him. "Oniichan, Oniichan!"

His cheeks were red and swollen, and Fujishima wondered if he had been hit there, too. Blood ran from the corner of his lips. When Fujishima put his arms around his tiny shoulders, his mother screamed. She pulled Tohru away from him and threw him on the ground.

"Don't you dare touch Keishi-san with those filthy little hands! Who are you calling 'Oniichan'? Keishi is most certainly *not* your brother!" she yelled and hit him with the broom as if she were mad. Fujishima was so frightened of his mother's violence that he couldn't speak. He knew he should help Tohru, but his body wouldn't move. The memory of his mother spanking him shackled both his legs.

After Tohru couldn't yell any longer, his mother finally sighed with relief.

"There were footsteps last night, remember? I thought it was strange, so I went to the storehouse and found a key to the back door and many of your things. This boy used the key to steal things from your room! He's a thief!"

Clothes and books he had given Tohru were burning in the smoldering fire.

"I didn't steal them! Oniichan gave them to me!"

His mother smacked Tohru's head with the bamboo broom. "Keishi-san certainly would not give someone like you anything!"

Tohru held his head and looked up at Fujishima. "Oniichan, help me. Help me..."

Fujishima was torn between Tohru and his mother. He didn't know what to do so he just stood there. He had to tell the truth. He had to tell her he gave those things to him and that he hadn't stolen them. If he didn't prove Tohru was innocent, she would think he was a thief.

"Keishi-san, have you been seeing this child behind my back?"

Fujishima froze under her doubtful gaze. Her cold eyes were like a snake's and he couldn't speak. She took his silence as a denial and kicked Tohru with a triumphant look on her face.

"There, you see? Keishi-san doesn't know you. You're a liar!"

Tohru's eyes opened wide in disbelief. The sound of the broom whacking the child echoed again. Tears sprang to Fujishima's eyes. His body began to tremble.

"Mother...Mother, please stop," he pleaded in a small voice which took all of his courage to muster. She

turned around. "Please stop. He's so small, he'll...he'll die!"

His mother walked up to him and stroked her son's face. "You're such a kind boy, Keishi-san. I understand how you feel, so go to your room now."

"P-Promise me you won't hit Tohru anymore..."

"I said, go to your room."

His mother took him by the hand, dragged him to the house and then disappeared back into the garden. Fujishima ran inside and grabbed Tamae, who was making dinner, and pleaded with her to stop his mother.

After she heard what was going on, Tamae ran out to the garden. Fujishima couldn't settle down and paced around the kitchen. After some time passed, Tamae still hadn't returned, and although he was worried about Tohru and wanted to know what was going on, he feared his mother's wrath and didn't dare step outside. Suddenly he got an idea and ran up to the second floor guest bedroom, which had a view of the garden. All he saw were the smoldering remains of the clothes and books. There wasn't a sign of anyone out there.

Fujishima didn't go downstairs when it was time for dinner. He knew his mother would ask him the details of his relationship with Tohru at the dinner table. He was frightened. Even when his mother came up to tell him dinner was ready, he lied and said he wasn't hungry. His mother told him she'd get Tamae to make him something light and that he could eat in his room.

That night after he saw his mother's car leave the driveway, Fujishima went down to the garden. Just as he was about to knock on the storehouse door, he noticed

it was padlocked from the outside. That meant Tohru couldn't get out on his own. He was sure it was his mother who had done it.

He knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

"Tohru, it's me. Are you in there?" He put his ear to the door and heard something. "I'm sorry about today. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. It looked so painful. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. Does it hurt? Are you hurt?"

He heard a mumble from the other side of the door.

"I can't hear what you're saying. Can you talk louder?"

"I said you're a liar!"

Fujishima trembled.

"Liar, liar, liar! You *did* give me those clothes and books! I never said I wanted any of it, you gave it to me yourself! You gave me the key and told me to use it to come see you! So why didn't you tell her? Why'd you make me get in trouble for it?"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." It felt like his chest was being pierced by a knife.

"You're an idiot! I wish you were dead!"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

"You think I'd ever forgive you, you traitor?"

He couldn't defend himself. He hadn't been able to say anything because he was afraid of his mother. It was true that in the end he had let Tohru get blamed for everything. Even though Tohru couldn't see him, he got down on his hands and knees and begged for forgiveness, but all Tohru did was yell, "Traitor!"

He lost track of time, and when his body was



thoroughly chilled by the cool autumn air he heard the sound of his mother's car. "I'm really sorry. Good night," he said quickly, and ran inside the house. After he returned to his room all he could think about was if Tohru was crying or hurt.

Just remembering the sight of his tiny body being hit over and over again brought tears to his eyes. It was just as Tohru said. It was because he hadn't said anything, he had been too worried about protecting himself that Tohru had to suffer that abuse. He had made poor Tohru look to be the bad guy in front of his mother. Why couldn't he have told his mother the truth? Why couldn't he have stopped her and protected him? Tohru didn't do anything wrong, he didn't do anything...

He deeply regretted not being able to do anything in front of his mother. He felt ashamed at his cowardice. He hated himself for being so weak that he couldn't even protect the one thing that was so important to him. But no matter how much he regretted it now, he couldn't regain the trust he had lost.

The next day he went to the storehouse again after his mother had left and apologized through the padlocked door. This time there was no answer from Tohru. No matter how many times he went the door was always padlocked, so he asked Tamae about it; but all she would say was that his mother had the key.

He knew he had to see Tohru and apologize face-to-face, so he went to his elementary school. Even after going there every day for a week, he saw no sign of Tohru. He wondered if he knew he was waiting for him so he was purposely avoiding him.

It was a cold, grey evening. It started to rain so Fujishima sought shelter under the overhang of a convenience store. A small boy ran up with the same idea. He looked as if he would be in elementary school.

"Hey, are you in sixth grade?"

The boy looked at him suspiciously. It was obvious he was wary of strangers.

"U-Uh, a kid I know goes to that school over there. He's in sixth grade and his name is Tohru Takahisa. Know him?"

"Yeah, I know him. He's in the class next door to me," the kid murmured.

"I came to pick him up but I couldn't find him."

"He's absent."

"Huh?"

"We had gym class together but he wasn't there again today. Some kid from his class told me he's been absent for a while."

Tohru hadn't been going to school...Fujishima had a bad feeling. The next day was Saturday and he watched the garden from the second floor window the whole day and not once did he see someone bring Tohru any food.

That night after his mother went to sleep he went to Tamae's room. "Why haven't you been feeding Tohru?" he asked her.

"Feeding him?"

"I didn't see you bring any food to him the whole day!"

Tamae looked around nervously and said, "Keishisan, please lower your voice. She'll hear you." She invited him in and poured him some tea. "He's not at the

storehouse anymore. But he's fine, so don't worry."

She seemed so calm that it relaxed him a little. He suddenly felt embarrassed at how rude he had been. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"Don't worry about it."

"Where is Tohru now?"

"...I don't know."

"But you just said he's fine."

Tamae shut her mouth.

"When will he come back?"

"I don't know that. Please don't ask me anything more. He's fine. Please just leave it at that."

No matter how much he tried, she wouldn't tell him anything more.

Once he knew Tohru was no longer in the storehouse, he began searching for him at train stations on the way to his school, but he wasn't there. Maybe the reason he hadn't been attending school was because he had been forced to transfer somewhere else, and was far away?

He realized that his father would definitely know where Tohru was. But he hadn't seen his father for some time, and had no idea when he'd be back. He asked Tamae, and she said he had been on a business trip overseas since the previous month. He felt like his mother had planned on getting rid of Tohru while his father was out of town.

He wanted to know where he was. When his mother went out that evening he snuck into her room. If Tohru had changed schools, perhaps the paperwork was somewhere in there. He found nothing relating to Tohru.

but instead found some interesting photographs inside one of her dresser drawers, stuffed inside a wooden box. They were pictures of her and a middle-aged man he didn't recognize, with his arm around his mother's shoulders.

More time passed, and he still didn't know Tohru's whereabouts. Winter turned into spring. At the beginning of March, Fujishima was accepted into his first-choice university, a business school. It was only one month before he had to begin college. He thought he could finally use that free time to search more places for Tohru, but his mother suggested they go on a trip together to celebrate his high school graduation. Of course he couldn't say he'd rather search for Tohru, and he couldn't disobey his mother, so he went on the trip. During the three weeks they stayed at the overseas resort, he'd think of Tohru every time he saw a small child playing on the white beach.

The day they arrived, his mother introduced him to someone she ran into there "by chance." It was the man he saw in the pictures from his mother's room. After that, the man appeared frequently and took his mother out almost every night. Fujishima realized this trip was just a cover-up for a chance for his mother to be with her lover. His mother had no self-control.

While his mother was out with her lover, all Fujishima did was think about Tohru. While walking on the pretty sandy beaches, while eating, he'd suddenly think of Tohru's face or his tears and become sad. On the way home from the entirely miserable vacation, Fujishima bought a bunch of candy he thought Tohru

might like even though he knew he wouldn't be able to give it to him.

When they returned to Japan, his mother grabbed his hand before walking into the house and said, "Come here."

Fujishima couldn't believe his eyes. During their three-week trip, the old storehouse Tohru had lived in had been demolished and in its place was an English garden.

"Isn't it beautiful?" His mother was as giddy as a young girl as she looked at the springtime flowers.

Fujishima didn't respond and stood there, dumbfounded. Even though he knew he could never bring Tohru back here, it was sad to see any trace of Tohru erased.

When he went in the house, he walked upstairs and stared down at the changed garden. Suddenly he thought he saw someone moving down there and pressed his forehead against the glass. He couldn't see them clearly. He ran out of the room and down the stairs. He dashed into the garden and desperately searched for the small child. Maybe he had gotten lost since the garden had changed so much.

He heard a rustling noise and turned around. Tamae was there, holding a plastic shopping bag.

"Welcome home. You're home earlier than I expected."

"We caught an earlier flight."

"You must be tired. I'll make you some tea," she said, and began to walk to the back door.

"Tamae..." Fujishima called. She turned around

and looked at him. "I thought I saw someone out here."

"Maybe it was just me?"

"Oh...I guess you're right." Fujishima stared at the blooming flowers again. "Did my mother ask you to make this garden?"

"She ordered me to have it done while you were away, yes."

He started to ask something about Tohru, then stopped. "What about all the things that were inside the storehouse?"

"She told me to get rid of them."

He looked down and bit his lip. He balled his hands up into fists.

"Is it all right if I come see you tonight? I have something to talk to you about," Tamae said.

Fujishima looked up. "About what?"

"I'll tell you tonight." Tamae nodded slightly and quickly disappeared inside the house. He had a feeling it might be about Tohru, so he impatiently waited for night to come.

After 10 p.m., Tamae came to his room with a tray of tea and snacks. She was also carrying a small bag. She had the week off the following week. "I'll be sixty-five next year, and my body is growing weaker. My daughter said she'd live with me, so I asked for some time off to arrange things."

"Thank you for your help all these years," Fujishima said, bowing his head.

"Your mother told me not to mention Tohru-chan to you, but since this is the last time I'll get to speak with you..."

Tamae told him what happened. The day after Tohru had been beaten by his mother, he developed a fever. Tamae had found him like that when she brought him food so she quickly took him to the hospital. They told her he had broken ribs, and from the numerous injuries he had the doctor suspected child abuse. Tamae went home and consulted his mother, who said, "Why didn't you just leave him be?" and got very upset. Tamae realized she wouldn't help, so she contacted his father, who was still overseas. He arranged for Tohru to be transferred to another hospital run by a doctor he was friends with. Tamae went to visit him a few times a week, and after about a month he was discharged from the hospital. She wasn't told where he went after that.

"Your father told me he wouldn't allow Tohru to come back to this place. I think he was going to send him to a boarding school."

Fujishima began to cry after he learned that Tohru was so injured he had broken bones.

"What's that?" he pointed to the small bag.

Tamae took a small indigo kimono out. "She told me to get rid of everything, but I just didn't have the heart to throw this away. He took care of it so well. I'll return it to you."

Fujishima took it with trembling hands. He remembered the way Tohru ran about in it so happily.

"It looked so good on him, and he was such a good, sweet child. Why did your mother treat him so badly? He was just a child..." Tamae wiped away tears.

"It's my fault," Fujishima murmured, clutching the kimono. "I didn't protect him. When Mother said he had

stolen it, I didn't deny it. So that's why she hit him."

"I think she had an idea that he was going to your room at night," Tamae said quietly. "Sometimes she'd say, 'I heard something upstairs' or 'I heard people talking' but I'd try to tell her it was just her imagination. But it just kept bothering her. Soon she began to say all the time, 'Keishi-san wouldn't betray me, right?' I think that made her anger even worse."

Tohru's small body had been abused so because of Fujishima. He had been beaten over and over again until his ribs had broken. Fujishima wanted to kill himself for allowing that to happen. He was a coward not to protect someone he cared about.

The next day Fujishima visited his father's room. "Please tell me where Tohru's going to school," he said abruptly.

"Why?" his father asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I want to go see him."

"And do what?" His father set his book down on his desk.

"I want to apologize..."

After he looked at his son's face, his father slammed his hand down on the book and said, "I won't tell you. I won't tell you so you can go kill him. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

"I-I wouldn't kill him!"

"Yes, it was your mother who nearly killed him. One of his broken ribs pierced his lung and he was in critical condition! I never thought she had much sense in her, but I didn't think she was this stupid. I heard you were right there when it happened."

His sharp gaze pierced through Fujishima.

"I heard you were right there and didn't do a thing to stop it."

Fujishima's body froze.

"But..."

"If he had died, there would be no buts! You're eighteen years old! Have you no common sense?" he yelled.

Fujishima shrank back like a leaking balloon.

His father sighed, and brushed back his hair. "I didn't do anything to help, so I have responsibility here. I'm going to look after him until he's an adult. But I want you to have absolutely nothing to do with him from now on."

Fujishima left his father's room, defeated. He knew he had no right to apologize. Since he didn't do anything to help, he had no right to be by Tohru's side any longer.

By the time he realized it, he was standing in the English garden which replaced the storehouse. The hopelessness of never being able to see Tohru again swept over him. He could never hold the hand that had comforted him so. He could never see him again. One after another, tears spilled from his eyes. It was the first time he had to say goodbye to something he loved.

But if he could see him again, how could he apologize for letting him endure such abuse? He would do anything to get his forgiveness.

He hoped Tohru would make friends at his new school. He didn't want him to be lonely. He hoped he would forget everything that happened at this house

quickly, and be happy.

The next time he saw Tohru was five years later. Fujishima had begun working for his father's company, but was subjected to harsh days of training and business trips.

That day he came home early for him, at seven p.m. When he went inside he saw some sneakers in the foyer. He asked one of the servants if someone was visiting, but she gave a vague answer of "Well, yes, but..."

He thought that meant it was his mother's lover. But by the look of those shoes, they belonged to someone much younger. Fujishima gave up trying to figure it out and asked the servant to bring his dinner to his room.

He had just reached the stairs when he heard a door close behind him. He turned around and saw an unfamiliar, thin young man coming out of the bathroom. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and looked to be in high school.

When the boy noticed Fujishima he narrowed his eyes. The corner of his mouth twitched and he slowly walked up to him. Fujishima thought he should introduce himself and started to speak when the boy suddenly punched him. The force of the impact knocked him into the stairs and he fell onto his back. A metallic taste spread through his mouth and he looked up at the boy, stunned.

The boy looked down at him and began to laugh. Then he turned on his heel and disappeared down the hallway.

Fujishima couldn't believe it, but it was Tohru.

Tohru had gotten into a fight at school and had

barely avoided expulsion. Instead he had been suspended. His face was no longer innocent as it had been when he was a child, and now Fujishima feared his violent nature.

He wanted to apologize to him, but every time his eyes met Tohru's cold gaze, his body began to tremble and he couldn't get any words out. Even when he got up enough courage to speak, Tohru would ignore him.

Just having Tohru in the house made the atmosphere there tense. His violence spread to others and the servants began to fear him as well.

After he was done with his suspension there were times when he would again cause trouble at school, and have to be sent home. He used a guest bedroom on the first floor.

Every time Tohru came home, Fujishima's mother would have a hysteric fit and take it out on the servants. Fujishima didn't know why Tohru caused such problems, but later wondered if he just wanted to be taken care of by the only relative he had—Fujishima's father.

Two months after Tohru graduated high school, on a cold winter's day, Fujishima's father died. A servant found him dead in his sleep. It was a heart attack. The funeral was subdued, and even though his mother wore mourning clothes her face looked bright and happy.

Tohru wasn't at the funeral. His father's secretary was supposed to have informed him, so he wondered why he hadn't shown up.

Two weeks after the funeral, Tohru returned home. During that time Fujishima was very busy at work deciding who would take over his father's duties. Of course since

he was the successor there were no objections, but the employees were apparently unhappy about the man he pegged to be the next president. For a few years now Fujishima had been concerned that the quality of Nagiryu had declined. They had put more emphasis on efficiency in order to keep up with worldwide demand, but in doing so the quality had gradually fallen. He was concerned about their longtime customers. His number one priority became restoring Nagiryu's top quality, so he had promoted a section manager to president, but it wasn't a popular decision.

But no matter what anyone said, Fujishima had no intention of changing his mind. He didn't want to take over Nagiryu, but he felt responsible for protecting its name, and he did have some nostalgic affection for those indigo kimonos.

That day he went to work as usual and came home at 5 p.m. When he entered the house, he was greeted by loud voices echoing from the hallway.

"I'm gonna kill you!"

He quickly ran into the living room to see what was going on, and saw a soaking wet Tohru standing in front of his mother.

"You stupid bitch!" Tohru cursed.

His mother didn't flinch. She raised a hand to her mouth and said, "That's enough of your foul mouth!" She noticed Fujishima standing in the doorway. "Oh, welcome home, Keishi-san. How was work?"

Tohru turned around and glared at him.

"F-Fine. What's going on?" He timidly entered the room.

Tohru hung his head and his mother glanced at him.

"He's angry that I didn't tell him your father died. Even though there was no reason to tell him such a thing. I thought I would take that chance to let him know exactly where he stands."

Fujishima was surprised. "I thought Father's secretary was supposed to tell Tohru?"

His mother raised an eyebrow. "I told him not to. It was such a depressing funeral, I didn't want to make it worse by seeing *his* face there."

Fujishima couldn't believe his mother's selfish words. She turned around and spoke to Tohru in a calm voice. "You're a complete outsider in this family. How dare you come to my house? Get out of here, you parasite. And don't ever come here again."

Fujishima's hands shook.

"I'm not going anywhere," Tohru said, looking up. Water dripped from his chin. "I have a right to the inheritance. Dad recognized me as part of his family. I'm related to him by blood, no matter if you like it or not."

His mother gave a high-pitched laugh. "Related by blood? Don't make me laugh. You don't know anything."

"Stop it, Mother," Fujishima pleaded, but she didn't listen.

"This boy seems to think that he's related to this family by blood!"

Tohru was trembling with anger and he raised his eyebrow. "Don't play dumb with me. I'm my father's son, so..."



Fujishima's mother snorted. "If you think I'm lying, get a DNA test. That man was impotent since before you were born. Tell me, can an impotent man father a child? The only reason he brought you into this house was because of his hatred towards me."

"Stop screwing around! Why would he treat me like a son if we weren't related?" Tohru's voice trembled slightly.

"I told you, he hated me. He hated me so much he dirtied my family registry over it."

"You're lying, you're lying!" Tohru yelled, kicking the sofa beside him. He knocked a flower vase off of the end table. "Stop lying! You just don't want to give me any inheritance, so you're lying! I know that's what you're doing."

Fujishima's mother stared at Tohru. "I wondered if you might have been related by blood at some point. I thought if I could give you ten million yen that would be a small sum to get rid of you. But it's not so—you're completely unrelated." She looked down and sighed. "You should be thankful we've paid for your schooling. But now you want us to give you an inheritance when you're a complete stranger? Please. You need to know your place."

Tohru didn't look up.

"But if it's money you want, name your price. One million? Two?"

Tohru glanced up. His eyes were wide and he looked at Fujishima pleadingly. "She's lying, isn't she?"

His eyes were the same as that time when his

mother had beat him. His eyes pleaded for him to save him. Fujishima painfully understood how badly Tohru wanted to be his father's true child. But he couldn't lie to him. Even if he did, one day he would find out the truth.

"Well..."

"Answer me, you shithead!"

His back trembled. He had to say something. "E-Even if you weren't related by blood, Father still treated you like a son. You have a right to an inheritance. I'll consult a lawyer and have something arranged..."

Dark shadows raced through Tohru's eyes.

"Keishi-san, what are you talking about? Why should we give him any money?"

Tohru laughed. He hunched his back over and looked up. His cheeks were wet with tears. "I don't want money. Go eat shit!" he spat, and ran out of the room. Fujishima tried to go after him, but Tohru's figure disappeared into the harsh rain and the grey landscape.

He didn't return to the high school dormitory and Fujishima wasn't sure where he went. His high school diploma arrived in the mail. Fujishima called his father's secretary and learned that Tohru had gotten accepted to a certain university. Fujishima arranged to have Tohru's tuition fully paid for, but there wasn't any indication that he was attending his classes.

He tried searching for him, but since he didn't know any of Tohru's friends it was difficult. He used a private detective agency and eventually found him two months later. He was living in the neighboring prefecture, working as a delivery man.

Fujishima went to see him. Tohru lived in a ramshackle apartment building. There wasn't any doorbell, so he knocked on the door. The door opened slightly, and then slammed shut. He heard the sound of the key in the lock and after that, complete silence.

Every time he got some time off Fujishima went to visit Tohru's apartment, but he never got him to open the door. Even when he got lawyers involved to send mail to him, there was no response. As a last resort he went to his workplace, but all Tohru did was glare at him and then punch him.

That finally got the point across to Fujishima that Tohru hated him. After that, he sent one more letter. He wrote that if Tohru ever needed anything that he could contact him. He included his cell phone number.

After he sent that last letter, he stopped going to his apartment. Sometimes he would go to his workplace and watch him work, but he never called out to him, and it seemed like Tohru never caught on.

After that four years passed, and then Tohru caused the accident. He lost all his memories, all his hatred and anger towards Fujishima...and returned to him.

While he sat on the floor remembering the past, he must have fallen asleep. His room was dark and chilly. He stood up and stretched. He turned on a light and saw that it was eight p.m. He thought it was awfully dark for eight o'clock, so he peered out the window and saw that

it was raining.

When he remembered his fight with Tohru, he began to feel depressed. It couldn't be helped that he couldn't have a relationship with Tohru now.

He sighed and moved his bag in front of his closet. He had started to unpack when he heard a knock on the door.

"Fujishima-san, dinner's ready."

"All right."

He had run to his room to escape their fight, but the voice he heard from the other side of the door sounded calm.

The dinner set out on the table was colorful and beautiful. Salmon cream stew, sautéed mushrooms and salad. Tohru had a rocky start when he first started cooking, but not even six months later he had improved greatly.

"This is the first time I made salmon stew, what do you think?" Tohru asked suddenly.

"It's delicious."

"Good," Tohru said with a sigh of relief. Apparently he had gone shopping for ingredients while Fujishima was asleep. "I was going to make chicken teriyaki, but the salmon was really fresh at the store."

He paused for a moment. "I have something I want to ask you."

Fujishima froze.

"What?"

"Well, how...no, never mind. It'll take too long."

He wondered if it was a continuation of their argument and got depressed again. If he asked him

again, he wouldn't have the confidence to be able to say anything.

"Don't worry, it's not anything bad," Tohru assured him, as if he had read his mind. He believed him and after dinner, in the living room, he asked him to continue.

"Before, you told me we met through work, but what kind of job was it?"

Once, after Tohru lost his memory, he wanted to know how he and Fujishima knew each other. He had no intention of telling him they were brothers according to the family registry (even though they weren't related), and had lived together for over a year. So he had lied and told him they met through work.

"Where did we work?" Tohru asked again after Fujishima's silence. He couldn't think of anything. He heard the honk of a passing car. Cars, cars...

"A-At a gas station."

"Huh?" Tohru asked, tilting his head. "I can't picture you working at a gas station. How old was I?"

Fujishima hesitated at being asked such a specific question. One couldn't have a job in middle school. He'd heard of some high school students having jobs.

"Eighteen."

"So when during the year did we meet when I was eighteen?"

The image of Tohru's faded blue baseball cap jumped to mind.

"Summer."

"Hmm. So how long did we work together?"

"About a year..."

Suddenly there was a loud noise and Fujishima

jumped. Tohru had slammed both hands on the table.

"Fujishima-san, why are you lying?" he asked, glaring at him. "I had no idea you could lie without even blinking an eye!"

Fujishima wondered how Tohru knew.

"When I first came here I was going to work at a convenience store and you helped me write a resume, remember? And back then you didn't tell me anything about working at any gas station!"

He had completely forgotten about writing that resume. What an idiot! He didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry... I was mistaken," he tried to lie again, but Tohru shouted: "Liar! Why are you lying? Why don't you want to tell me the truth?"

Fujishima leaned back on the couch and looked down.

"Why are you lying? What are you hiding? Tell me! I want to know where, how and when we met!"

Fujishima's hands began to tremble. Sweat began to collect on his back. He didn't want to tell him. He didn't want to tell Tohru he started having feelings for him when he was in elementary school. He knew he would judge him.

"Why won't you tell me?" Tohru pressed.

"Because... I'm ashamed."

Why did he lie to Tohru in the beginning? After realizing he didn't have any of his memories, why did he decide not to tell him anything about the past? There was a reason why he tried to hide the accident from him, but that wasn't all.

Tohru had hated him. Ever since he had touched

him, and then Tohru had been beaten by his mother, he had held a grudge against him. No matter how much he apologized, it hadn't changed his feelings.

But after Tohru lost his memory, he no longer looked at him with those cold, judging eyes. Because he didn't know what had happened. But if he told him the truth, he would start to hate him again.

"No matter what the reason is, I won't get mad," Tohru whispered. "My feelings for you won't change."

Fujishima wondered if that was true. Could he really not hate him if he told him all those shameful things?

Tohru stared at him with serious eyes, with the same look as when he first told him he loved him. Maybe it would be all right to tell him. Maybe he would laugh about it all. But then what? Would they be able to love each other?

And if they could, there would be no going back. He wouldn't be able to hold anything back. He wouldn't want to hand him over to anyone else. He knew Tohru would be able to do that now, but if he got his memory back...what would happen?

He didn't think he would ever be able to love anyone else like he loved Tohru. He would always be worried that at some point Tohru's memory would come back.

Tohru stood up from the couch and stood in front of Fujishima. Fujishima trembled with nervousness.

"Is the reason you don't want to tell me, because you can only share it with the person I was before I lost my memory?"

"No..."

"Be honest with me. That's the only reason I can think of."

Fujishima slumped his shoulders. He didn't want to tell him about the past. He didn't need them to become lovers, either. Things were fine the way they were. He wanted to live with Tohru, knowing he loved him. He had told him he loved him, and that was enough. He couldn't be happier.

Tohru knelt in front of Fujishima. "Please tell me about the old me." He grasped both his hands. "Where did we meet? Why did you fall in love with me? If you just tell me that, I can have some connection to the old me."

Tohru stared at him. "If you can tell me all that and I can still say I love you, then what's the problem? I'm me. Even if my memory comes back, I'll still love you. I'll probably only wonder why I didn't back then."

Even if he said that now, he didn't think the old Tohru would forgive him so easily.

"I..."

Tohru was the first person he had ever loved. He couldn't ever forget him.

"I..."

His teeth chattered. Tears spilled from both his eyes. They dropped onto Tohru's hands.

"Why are you crying?" Tohru peered at his face. "Please don't cry."

He wanted to stop, but he couldn't. "I'm sorry..." he whispered.

"You don't have to apologize."

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He wanted to stop, but he couldn't. "I'm sorry..." he whispered.

"You don't have to apologize."

He pressed his hands against his face, but the tears still leaked out. Tohru paced around, and then suddenly left the room. He heard the front door close.

He cried even more at the loneliness of being left alone. After a while he felt himself calm down. His eyes were red and swollen. He got up to wash his face when he heard footsteps running down the hall.

Tohru rushed into the living room and then ran into the kitchen. He heard the cupboards being slammed and the sound of plates. Fujishima stared dazedly as Tohru returned with a small plate in his hand.

"H-Here," he said, wheezing. It was a piece of chocolate cake. "I ran all the way here so it's a little messed up, but it's the old man's specialty so I know it's good."

"Thanks..." he said and took the plate. He didn't even feel like eating his beloved cake right now.

"Sit down." Tohru grabbed his right hand and pulled him over to the couch. He took a forkful of cake and brought it to Fujishima's mouth, as if he were feeding a child. He wasn't sure what to do, so he opened his mouth. Tohru fed him the cake. "Is it good?"

"Yeah," he answered, his mouth full of cake. Tohru sighed with relief.

"I'm sorry," Tohru whispered.

"I'm sorry I asked you so many questions when it makes you uncomfortable," Tohru apologized. "When I saw you start to cry I just went blank and I just wanted to give you something that would make you happy."

Fujishima felt comforted. Tohru went out to get the cake just because he was sad. That made him so happy.



After Tohru fed him the cake, he never asked about the past again.

The day after he was released from the hospital, Fujishima returned to work. Even though he hadn't had the job for more than six months, he had taken a lot of time off because of his hospital stay. No one at his job could really say anything, but his boss said some harsh things to him. Luckily his co-workers welcomed him back.

After he had sold his father's company, the only thing he had left was his condo and the money he had given Tohru to attend school. He didn't know when Tohru might want to go back, so he was carefully holding onto it. He also had a small bit of savings.

After Tohru had made him cry, he never asked about the past or about becoming lovers.

The pleasant May weather continued, but when June came so did the rain. One Sunday morning, Tohru looked out the window at the grey sky and sighed.

The previous week he had asked Fujishima to go with him to the botanical gardens to see the hydrangea, but it had been raining the entire day. They had decided to get ready anyway, but the rain hadn't let up.

"It rained all day yesterday, too," Tohru said, sulking. He curled up on the couch like a cat. Lately they liked to take walks on the bank of the river after dinner.

He had been so excited about going to the gardens

that Fujishima wondered how he would make it up to him. He cursed himself for not being able to find the right words to say.

Suddenly he had an idea and went to his room. He took one of the photo albums from his shelf and came back to the living room with it. He pushed it in front of Tohru.

"What?" He tilted his head.

"There are pictures of hydrangea in there."

After blinking his eyes a few times, Tohru smiled and said, "Thanks! Let's look at them together."

Tohru opened the book on the floor and Fujishima sat across from him. The pictures of the flowers were colorful and vivid. Tohru flipped through the pages and stopped on one of sunflowers. "This summer, let's go camping! With a tent and everything."

"That sounds like fun," Fujishima agreed.

"Are you sure you're okay with sleeping in a tent?"

"Well, I don't know because I've never done it before."

"You've never gone camping?"

Fujishima shook his head. He had been invited many times when he was in school, but his mother had always refused, saying sleeping outside was dirty.

"I'll arrange everything, so let's go this summer."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Yeah," Fujishima answered. He wished he could freeze this moment forever.

"Isn't this book mine?"

"Yeah."

"I don't remember it, but it's really pretty."

After Tohru's accident, Fujishima had cleaned out his old apartment. There weren't many things inside and it smelled of cigarette smoke. There was only one colorful spot in the entire place, where he kept his photo albums. He also found a cardboard box with many pictures inside. Until he saw them, he had no idea that Tohru's hobby had been photography.

The photographs inside the box were all of scenery. They were all beautiful and some had a touch of sadness to them.

As he flipped through the photographs, eventually he came to a picture of a young boy. That was the only photo with a semblance of warmth to it. The child looked shy in front of the camera.

He saved only a few daily necessities and the photo books, and got rid of everything else. He didn't know what to do with the box of photos, so he kept them in his room. They had belonged to the old Tohru. The new Tohru could take new photos.

But it was only an excuse, after all. He was afraid that showing him the photos would jog his memory.

Now Tohru had no interest in photography.

Suddenly Tohru stood up. "I'm going to make lunch. Then let's have a picnic right here." He rushed into the kitchen and about a half-hour later lunch was done. He set the photo book on the couch and opened it to the page with the hydrangea on it. He spread a picnic blanket out on the floor and poured some tea from a vacuum bottle. Fujishima was happy seeing Tohru so

excited. They ate lunch together while they looked at the photo of the hydrangea.

"Nice weather today, isn't it?" Tohru teased, looking out the window. "Wait, the sun *is* coming out!"

The rain had cleared up and the sun was starting to peek out from the clouds. They both looked at each other and burst out laughing. Even though it was sunny out, they continued their picnic indoors. They opened the window and lay on the blanket, looking up and out at the blue sky.

"You're amazing," Fujishima whispered.

Tohru peered at him. "Why?"

"It really does feel like a picnic."

Tohru blushed and hid his face. Fujishima closed his eyes, content with the warm breeze and his full belly.

He was awakened by the sound of a car honking. He felt something touching his right hand. He looked over and saw that Tohru was gently holding his hand.

"Let's go all sorts of places together."

Since he was lying down he couldn't see his face.

"Let's make so many memories that you forget about the old me."

His chest swelled.

"And I'll make you like me more than the old me. So much that you'll wish my memory would never come back." Then Tohru fell asleep. Fujishima sat up and stared at Tohru's innocent sleeping face.

That night Fujishima asked if Tohru wanted to go out to eat. He wanted to give Tohru a rest since he had spent all day cooking.

"You don't ask me to go out to eat very often," Tohru said with a smile.

He wanted to go shopping first, so they left the house around four p.m. It wasn't raining, but there were large puddles everywhere and people were walking around with closed umbrellas. Tohru bought a T-shirt at a department store.

"Maybe I should start taking pictures?" he murmured, looking through a photo album in the stationery section. "Not to learn photography, just taking pictures of things I like."

Last Christmas Fujishima had given him a camera, but it was now in the closet since Tohru had no interest in it.

In the elevator, Tohru said, "Oh, can we go to the next floor?" He headed straight for the kitchen items. He looked through a number of cake molds. "Hey, do you know what kind this is?" he asked, holding up one with a hole in it.

Fujishima shook his head.

"It's a Bundt pan. I made one once at the shop, but I messed up."

Fujishima asked if he was going to buy it, but he shook his head and put it back in place. "No, after I practice some more," Tohru said, shrugging. "I'm gonna make a huge cake for your birthday!"

They walked side by side when suddenly Tohru said, "Whoa!" A little girl was running backwards and

ran right into him.

"S-Sorry! Are you hurt?" Tohru asked the little girl. She must have been about three years old. When Fujishima saw her face he thought his heart would stop. Her brown hair, her mother's eyes. When their eyes met, she shook off Tohru and ran over to Fujishima. "Papa!"

Why was she here? Fujishima began to panic. The girl started to cry and hugged him. "Don't cry, Maho," he said. "Where's Mommy?"

"I dunno!" she cried, and clutched him. She rubbed her face on him like a cat. "Why don't you come home, Papa?"

Fujishima's chest tightened at her innocent question.

"I've been waiting for you to come home!"

Tohru stood there, shocked. "Um, Fujishima-san?"

"There's Mommy!" Maho yelled, and Tohru twitched. "Mommy, I found Papa!"

They turned around and Fujishima saw his ex-wife, Emi. Her long hair was pulled back and she wore a blue dress with a white cardigan over it. She blinked in surprise and rushed over to him. "You look great," she said with a smile. "I never thought I'd run into you here. Are you by yourself?"

"No, I'm with someone..."

Emi looked over Fujishima's shoulder at Tohru. "He looks young, is he a friend from work?"

Emi didn't know about Fujishima's past and he had never told her about Tohru.

"No, he's..."

"Um..."

Turning around, he saw that Tohru's face was as stiff as a Noh mask. "I'm going to go home. Take your time, Fujishima-san. Thanks for keeping me company today." He bowed his head and walked off. Fujishima wanted to chase after him, but he couldn't while he held Maho. Tohru disappeared into the elevator. He couldn't imagine what he was thinking right now.

"Keishi-san..." Hearing his name, Fujishima came back to reality. He had completely forgotten his ex-wife and daughter were still there.

"I'm glad I ran into you. I've been trying to get a hold of you. Do you have some time to talk now?"

He was worried about Tohru, but he couldn't just leave them. Still holding Maho, he walked to the department store's tearoom. Maho wouldn't let go of him for anything, even when Emi scolded her. She just shook her head with tears in her eyes. "I love Papa..."

Fujishima felt very guilty as he stroked his daughter's back. He had divorced Emi not even a month after Tohru's accident. He had gotten down on his hands and knees and begged her to let him get a divorce. She had looked very sad and asked him to give her some time to think about it. After considering it carefully, she finally gave in.

Emi was a woman his mother had set him up with. She was two years older than him and came from a good family. She liked flower arranging and playing the piano, was a good cook and an excellent wife and mother. He didn't have any strong reasons for saying no to the marriage, so when he was twenty-four they got

married, and Maho was born the following year.

Even though it was a marriage of convenience, things went well between them, except for the fact that Fujishima couldn't have sex with her. Emi knew how much it troubled him, so that's probably why she never asked why he had wanted a divorce.

A month after their wedding, his mother started bothering him about having a baby. Of course he couldn't tell her he couldn't have sex with his wife, and it put a lot of stress on him. His mother wanted a grandchild, but more importantly she wanted an heir to the Fujishima family name, which made it even more painful for him.

Maho had been conceived when he had used his morning erection to be able to have sex with Emi, so it wasn't even proper sex. It was an empty act that he had felt obligated to do, and he knew that deeply hurt them both. After that he had never done it like that again, but from that one time Maho had been conceived.

Emi sipped some Earl Grey tea. "I'm glad you're looking so well. Your mother told me you haven't been home, so I've been worried. Have you been getting enough to eat? You can't cook at all...Or have you found someone to cook for you?" Emi asked teasingly. A kind smile was on her face. Fujishima cared about her. But it was different from how he loved Tohru.

"I can say it now, but at first I was a little afraid of you. You always looked so troubled and you rarely smiled. Every time we went on dates you were quiet, but I knew you were kind and serious. That's why I loved you." Emi looked down. "You treated Maho and me so well, at times I thought it would be okay to stay with you

even though you didn't love me back."

A beautiful loving wife and daughter. The ideal family.

"When you told me you wanted a divorce, honestly I was shocked. But I know how concerned you were about our relationship and I didn't want you to feel like I was a burden on you...I thought that you might be more at ease if we divorced, and then I could get back some self-confidence I had lost, too. I was a little relieved."

Maho fell asleep in Fujishima's arms, obviously exhausted.

"Since then, I moved far away. I'm seeing someone, too. He's older, and he just adores Maho. His parents live close to here, so I came today to see them. We're getting married next year, so I wanted to tell you I don't need child support from you anymore. I hope we can both be happy now," Emi said, a smile on her face.

Fujishima felt like the word "happy" was a difficult concept. He had gotten a divorce and was now single. Every person he thought of as family was unhappy. His father, Tohru, Emi, his mother...none of them had been happy.

If it was so bad, why didn't his father ever divorce his mother? His mother was selfish, but he had a feeling his father still loved her. Even though there was no way to be sure now...and his father hadn't completely abandoned him, either. He acted as if he were his real

son to the day he died. He had a feeling that was the ultimate expression of love from his father.

His mother got remarried six months after his father's funeral to the man she had been seeing the whole time. Apparently he was the president of some large company, and she bragged endlessly about it.

After she got married she left the house and started pressing Fujishima about marriage. She wanted him to settle down, and she also wanted an heir to the family. He did as she said and married, walking down the path his mother had set for him. And in the summer when he was twenty-eight, Tohru had his accident.

In order to help him, he used all his authority as company president. He knew they needed money so he didn't even hesitate to sell the company that had been in his family for generations. The other executives thought he was crazy, but by the time they contacted his mother it was all over. She flipped out, and he took some money and fled to this town, so he could be together with Tohru.

If his father had never been paralyzed in that accident and had been able to have children, maybe his mother wouldn't have been so obsessed with keeping the family name alive. Maybe his parents could have been happy. But if that had happened, he never would have been born and he never would have met Tohru.

It was past eight o'clock when he arrived back home. It had taken a long time to get Maho to let him go, but honestly the thought of Tohru alone at home worried him more than his crying daughter.

It was dark inside. At first he wondered if Tohru

was even home at all, but then he saw his shoes in the entrance. The hallway and living room were dark and silent. Fujishima went by Tohru's room, but couldn't get up the courage to knock on the door. He didn't know what to say to him.

He returned to the living room and sat down on the sofa. He picked up the photo book left over from their picnic. As he flipped through it, he wondered if Tohru would ever be happy. He wondered what could make Tohru happy. He was satisfied with the current situation. The person he loved said he loved him back and they were living together. He couldn't be happier. But he wondered how Tohru felt.

Emi was happy now that they had divorced, so he was glad that he had made the right decision. But would Tohru say the same thing? He didn't want to betray the person he was before he lost his memory. He didn't want to hurt him. Maybe Tohru would be happier with someone else.

Things were different now than they were right after the accident. Tohru was working at a place of his choice, and he was capable of living on his own. He'd be fine even without Fujishima. Maybe he'd even be better off...

He heard footsteps in the hallway. He looked up from the photo book and saw Tohru standing in the living room doorway. After a few moments he came in and sat across from Fujishima.

"Did you eat something?" he asked.

"No."

"I'm sorry, I didn't feel like cooking tonight."

"It's okay. I can go get something," Fujishima said, standing up.

"Wait," Tohru exclaimed and grabbed his right arm. Fujishima twitched and pulled away. "I want to ask you something," Tohru said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you..." his voice trembled. "...married?"

He wanted to tell him that he was divorced, but then he re-thought things. If he told him he was still married, maybe he'd give up on him.

"Yeah," he lied.

"I see..." Tohru whispered, and pushed his hair out of his face.

"I wish you would have told me earlier. Then I wouldn't have bothered you about things..." He looked up and smiled a little. "Your wife is really pretty. So's your little girl."

Even though he tried hard to be cheerful, his hands were shaking. It was obvious he was forcing himself. He looked away. The room filled with silence.

"You have such a beautiful wife to make you dinner instead of me. So then why are you still here?"

He couldn't answer.

"Do you feel sorry for me because I have amnesia?"

"Maybe..."

"If you feel sorry for me, then you feel sorry for me. But you shouldn't say you love me. You shouldn't have that look on your face that says you love me."

He didn't have an excuse so he just looked down.

"That's hurting everyone...your family and me."

His chest ached. From Tohru's point of view he

must look like such a jerk. He had a family, yet was still staying with him.

"Say something."

He couldn't say anything but that he was sorry. Tohru suddenly stood up and left the living room. A feeling of loss spread through him and the urge to tell him the truth seized him, but he told himself not to. Maybe Tohru would forget his feelings for him if he thought he was a jerk.

This is for the best, he kept telling himself.

The next morning when he woke up, he just couldn't bring himself to leave his room. He didn't want to face Tohru, but he had taken so much time off from being in the hospital that he couldn't afford to take another day off.

He went to the kitchen but no one was there, and breakfast was laid out on the table. There was a note next to it that said, "Went to work." Fujishima ate his breakfast in silence and wondered if this was how every morning would be without Tohru.

That night when he got home Tohru was standing in the kitchen making dinner. Seeing him relieved Fujishima. While he changed clothes in his room, Tohru knocked on his door and told him dinner was ready. When he went into the kitchen, he saw there was only dinner for him.

"I already ate with a friend," Tohru said, and left

the room. Just like that morning, Fujishima ate in silence and was consumed by his thoughts. He wondered which friend Tohru meant. He had never mentioned going out to eat with a friend before, and he wondered if he was lying.

As he ate, he thought he heard the sound of rain and paused. It was pouring outside, and the sound of the rain echoed throughout the room.

He didn't feel like finishing his dinner, but it would be a shame to waste the food so he forced himself to eat. Afterwards he felt sick. He threw the rest of the food away. He went to wash the dishes when Tohru came in from behind him.

"I'll do that," he insisted, and chased him out of the kitchen.

After he was finished doing the dishes, Tohru came into the living room with a white box. "All that was left today was an éclair. Sorry."

He put down some coffee on the table and put the éclair onto a plate. "Just put the dishes in the sink when you're done," he said, and left the room.

He was alone again. He stared absently at the fragrant coffee and éclair. Before he realized it, his coffee had gone cold and only the bitter taste stuck on his tongue. He put the éclair back in the refrigerator.

After he left the living room, he headed straight to Tohru's room. He knocked on the door.

"Oh, are you done eating?"

"No, I put it back in the fridge."

"Wasn't it good?" Tohru asked.

"No, that's not it. I just don't have much of an

appetite lately. I always get like this around this time of year. So I don't need dessert anymore, okay? I don't like wasting it."

Tohru blinked. "It's not a big deal. We throw away all the leftovers at the end of the day anyway at the shop."

"Well, you don't have to bring any more back," Fujishima said with an edge to his voice. He continued. "And you don't have to cook for me anymore, either."

Tohru went pale. "Why not?"

"There's no reason to, especially when you don't eat."

"Today was just a coincidence..." Tohru trailed off.

"I know you're trying to be nice. But I don't need it anymore. I want to eat separately from now on."

Tohru slammed the door in his face without warning. Fujishima stood frozen in the face of his rejection. After some time, he wondered if he should try to talk to Tohru again, but he couldn't find the words. If they didn't eat together anymore, they wouldn't have to see each other, and he could begin to distance himself.

The next morning, he woke up a little later than usual. He had had trouble getting to sleep and had nightmares. He didn't remember what the dreams were about, just that they were unpleasant.

He got out of bed and heard a knock on the door.

"Fujishima-san, are you up? You're going to be late for work."

He answered that he was up, and when he opened the door he didn't see Tohru anywhere. He had felt

relieved that Tohru's voice sounded normal. He thought he might be angry at him. Apparently Tohru couldn't let his roommate oversleep.

After he finished showering, he returned to his room and got dressed for work. He went into the hallway and heard sounds coming from the kitchen. The smell of coffee wafted to his nose. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to leave without saying anything, so he went into the living room.

"Oh, morning," Tohru said cheerfully. "Breakfast is ready, do you have time to eat?" Coffee, toast and salad was laid out on the table.

"I told you yesterday, you don't..." Fujishima started to say, but Tohru interrupted him.

"I was already making breakfast, it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't like I went out of my way to make it for you. If you have time, sit down and eat. The coffee will get cold."

Fujishima sat down. Tohru sat down across from him, his apron still on. Once they started to eat, Tohru grew silent. As Fujishima munched on his toast, he thought about all the breakfasts they had shared in the past. They had always talked about something. This silence bothered him.

After breakfast he thought about it on his way to work. Why had Tohru still made breakfast for him even after he said he wanted to eat separately? It was just an excuse to say that he was already making breakfast. Maybe Tohru knew what he was trying to do, and he didn't want to stop eating together because that would mean they'd no longer see each other.

That night after work, when he got home, dinner was ready. Fujishima didn't say anything. Tohru chattered throughout dinner as if nothing were wrong. Finally he seemed to get tired of talking and looked down and sighed.

"Is your friend a girl?" Fujishima asked.

Tohru looked up. "What friend?"

"The one you said you ate with the other day. Is it a girl?"

"Why does it matter?" Tohru asked, irritated. But he wouldn't answer.

Maybe he had been lying about going out to eat with a friend. Knowing that, he deliberately chose words that would make Tohru angry.

"I just would rather it was a girl."

Tohru's expression changed. Now he was seriously mad. "And why is that?"

"No particular reason."

Tohru slammed his chopsticks down on the table. "Are you trying to say you'd rather me date a girl? Even though you know how I feel about you? You know how I feel, so why would you ask me that?"

"Because..."

Tohru pushed his hair out of his face. He stomped his foot on the floor. "I..." He looked down and murmured. "I've been thinking lately, and I just don't know what to do." He looked up. "What do you want to do, Fujishima-san? Leave your family and look after me? Or...what?"

All he wanted to do was make Tohru happy, but he couldn't say that.

"I could have been fine living by myself, you

didn't have to leave your family. If you were so worried, you could have just come to check up on me now and then. Or did you want to be with me?"

Fujishima looked right in Tohru's eyes. "I'm going back to my family after you can live on your own."

"I see..." Tohru said, looking down. After a few moments he suddenly stood up from his chair and ran out of the room. He didn't return.

Where there's an end, there's a beginning. Fujishima had read that somewhere before, and he remembered it now. Since there was a beginning to them living together, there would be an end, too. When would that be?

He thought Tohru would finally stop making him food, but every day after that his meals were prepared for him. The only thing different was that he no longer brought home dessert, and he didn't talk during meals anymore.

Strangely, the quality of the food went up as the days went by. The food was as good as if it were from a restaurant. They always ate the delicious food in silence.

Since he didn't speak, Fujishima had no idea what Tohru was thinking. But one day at the beginning of July, he saw an apartment guide on the living room table. The end was near, he thought, and he waited for the day when Tohru would tell him he was moving out.

One day at the end of July, Fujishima decided to avoid the crowd at the train station and take a detour. He walked by the riverside, the spot where he and Tohru had walked together so many times.

He walked slowly on the sidewalk, the warm breeze on his face. He passed by someone walking their dog and remembered Tohru commenting once about how he liked that certain breed.

When he had walked this way with Tohru, he had never thought the path was long. But today it felt like it was taking forever.

There was always going to be an end. But ever since Tohru had met his ex-wife and child, the end had drawn nearer more quickly. The fewer memories they had together the easier it would be for him.

Sunflowers bloomed beside the embankment of the river. He stopped and stared at the yellow flowers. The sun was setting, and the sunflowers looked lonely in the shadows. He remembered Tohru inviting him to go camping during the summer. He wished they could have gone.

"Fujishima-san," a voice called.

Surprised, he dropped his suit jacket and bag.

"Ah, are you okay?" Tohru stopped his bicycle and picked up his bag and jacket. "Sorry to scare you. I didn't mean to. I've been behind you this whole time. didn't you notice?"

"I was spacing out."

"The sunflowers are pretty, aren't they?"

"Yeah..." Fujishima murmured while he took his bag back. He guessed Tohru was on his way back from

shopping from the bags he was carrying.

"You got off work early today, huh?"

"An appointment was cancelled..."

"Oh..." Tohru murmured, pushing his bicycle. They walked side by side. "Do you walk this way often?" he asked.

"No, the station was just really crowded today."

"Oh, because there's a festival going on. They're setting the stalls up at the temple already."

Hearing Tohru say the word "festival" reminded him of the time when he was young, when they went to the festival together, Tohru wearing the indigo kimono and holding Fujishima's hands. His innocent smile. That was more than ten years ago.

"Have you ever gone to a festival with your daughter?"

"No, I was always too busy with work...and she was too young to take, anyway."

"Hmm..." Tohru murmured. "The lady at the grocery store told me they're having fireworks tonight. Want to go?"

He felt like Tohru was inviting him. If he said yes, he'd ask if they could go together.

"It'll be too crowded," he said vaguely.

"Oh," Tohru answered, lowering his eyes. They walked for a few moments in silence. "I was meaning to tell you when we got home, but I'm moving out next month."

Even though he had been expecting it for some time, Fujishima stood still, startled. Tohru stopped, too.

"I found an apartment already. It's really cheap."

The old man from the bakery is going to co-sign on it for me."

"I could have done that for you..."

"No, I don't want to have to rely on you for anything," Tohru said. "I feel like I shouldn't."

"But won't it be hard to pay rent with just the money from the bakery? Let me help you until you get on your feet..."

"Don't worry, the old man offered me a full-time position and I'm going to start going to culinary school at night starting next spring. I'm going to get my certification."

It seemed like the owner of the bakery really adored Tohru. Plus, Tohru loved baking cakes, so this was a good thing for him.

"I'm fine on my own. So you can go home now," Tohru smiled. "If you don't hurry back to your family, you'll forget what your daughter looks like."

Why was he smiling? Fujishima wondered.

"Ever since I signed on the apartment I knew I had to talk to you about it, but I just didn't know how to bring it up. I felt like it would all be over if I talked to you about it. But I can't let your daughter be lonely just because of my selfishness." Tohru stopped his bicycle. "I'm going to be the best baker in Japan, and every year on your birthday I'll send you a huge cake."

Tohru saw a future for himself. He was starting something new and had a goal. That's what Fujishima had wanted for him, so why wasn't he satisfied? When Tohru fulfilled all of his goals, where would Fujishima be?

"I can't wait," Fujishima said, his voice echoing hollowly in his head.

When he walked past Tohru's door, he saw a stack of boxes inside. The reality of him leaving was starting to sink in. Tohru was going to be gone. And he had to decide what he was going to do when that day came. First he had to pretend like he was going home to his family. And in order to do that, he had to sell this place and buy a new condo. He wouldn't tell Tohru his new address. His lies would be exposed if Tohru visited him. But just in case, he'd tell him his work and cell phone numbers in case he ever needed anything.

Fujishima realized he was really going to be alone. He wanted to protect him so much that he had given up his house, his mother, his family. He never had any regrets about that. So then why did he feel so empty now?

He tried to tell himself that things were just returning to the way they used to be. Before Tohru lost his memory, there was no way he would have lived with him. He wouldn't have had any kind of relationship with him.

He needed to figure things out for himself. He needed something to immerse himself in. Maybe he would read. He used to love to read, but now he didn't feel like it. The passion was gone.

He couldn't think of anything else, so he threw

himself into his work. He went around to more clients than anyone else and got lots of contracts. He even worked through lunch. He didn't want to give his brain time to think, not until his head hit the pillow at night.

The next few days he was completely exhausted from the blazing heat. The humidity and fatigue stole his appetite, and at lunch he just had iced coffees.

"Fujishima-san, are you feeling all right?" Tohru asked him a few days before he was to move.

"I'm fine..."

"You haven't been eating much lately. I thought I'd make something light today, but even that hasn't seemed to help."

"The food is delicious. Don't worry about me."

Tohru furrowed his brow. "I do worry about you. You keep getting skinnier every day."

"I always get like this in the summertime," he lied. Tohru sighed.

"I'm not going to be able to move out if I'm worried about you. How can I give you back to your family when you're just skin and bones?"

"What do you mean?" Fujishima asked.

Tohru chewed his lip and thought. "Well...I'm kind of 'borrowing' you, so I should give you back in the same condition I received you in, right?"

Fujishima thought it was ironic that Tohru was acting like he was a thing, but he knew he didn't mean it in a bad way. He picked his bowl back up and quietly began to eat.

Tohru had bought that bowl. When they had first moved in, all he had was some plates, cups, a kettle and

a coffeemaker. Gradually their collection of cooking utensils and silverware had grown.

"You're taking all the kitchenware with you when you move, right?"

Tohru looked up. "I was thinking about leaving half of it. You'll need it, right?"

"No, I won't..."

Tohru said, "But..." then stopped. "Oh, that's right. You probably have everything you need back at your house."

Fujishima didn't answer.

"Is there anything special you want to eat?" Tohru asked when they were finished eating. "Tomorrow will be the last time we eat dinner together, so I'd like to make something special for you."

His words echoed in Fujishima's chest. Last time... last time. He had to say something. What did he want to eat? But he couldn't think of anything.

Tohru was going to leave the day after tomorrow. Since he was at that point, he probably wouldn't need Fujishima's help anymore. Maybe he would find someone he loved and get married, have his own family. He'd probably forget all about him. He'd think falling in love with a man was just a youthful indiscretion and forget all about it. It would be the same thing as if his memory came back. He'd just become part of his past.

But Fujishima didn't think he himself would ever forget. He wouldn't forget this year they had lived together. The way Tohru told him he loved him, the feeling of his kisses.

"You don't have to make anything tomorrow. You

have too much stuff to do. I'll find something to eat."

Tohru started to say, "But I want to make something—" but Fujishima interrupted him. "Thanks for dinner." He went back to his room.

He sat down on his bed and hoped the days would go by quickly.

The day before moving day was Sunday, so Fujishima had the day off. Tohru came back from work around three in the afternoon and started to get his things together. He had been packing for a while now, so he didn't have much left to do.

He was in the kitchen packing his cooking utensils into boxes when Fujishima asked if he could help, but Tohru said he could manage on his own. He sounded cold, so Fujishima figured he would be better off alone and returned to his room. He didn't have anything else to do, so he picked up a book, but put it back after reading only a few pages.

He heard a knock on the door. "Can you open the door for me?" Tohru called. Fujishima did so, and saw Tohru holding a stack of photo albums in his arms. "Here, you can have these back," he said, setting them down in front of the bookshelf. They were the ones Fujishima had given him while he was in the hospital.

"I know it's strange to give back something that was a gift, but I can't take them with me. I didn't want to throw them away, though...I'm sorry," Tohru apologized.

and left the room. Fujishima took the top one and looked through it.

He wondered if Tohru didn't want any reminders of the past since he was starting life on his own. He wondered if he should get rid of them after Tohru left, but had a feeling he wouldn't be able to. He lifted the book to his face. It smelled like Tohru.

He heard the front doorbell ring. He heard Tohru say, "Just a minute!" and the sound of him running. Fujishima didn't stir since he figured Tohru was answering it.

Suddenly he heard a shrill voice screaming. Wondering what all the commotion was, he rushed into the hallway and saw his mother. He froze.

"You demon!" she cried, grasping for Tohru. She caught hold of his sleeve, leaving him stunned. "I-I-It's all your fault that my family has been ruined! You've deceived poor innocent Keishi-san! This never would have happened if it wouldn't have been for you!"

Tohru looked confused and said, "Excuse me, but..."

"And now Nagiryu belongs to God only knows... it's all your fault!" His mother drew back her hand and slapped Tohru's left cheek, sending him onto his backside on the floor. Fujishima's mother jumped on top of him and started smacking him over and over again, reminding him of the time when she beat him when he was little.

"Stop it!" Fujishima yelled, coming in between the two of them. He peeled his mother off of Tohru, which finally made her realize he was there.

"Keishi-san, I've been looking all over for you," she said, outstretching a trembling hand. Fujishima backed away. Even though she was approaching fifty years old, she was still beautiful. But she was still as violent as ever. She looked at her frightened son with a sad look on her face.

"I'm not mad, I'm not mad so just come home. I know all about it. I know why you did such a reckless thing. Because you're so kind. You're too kind. I know everything, and I forgive you. So let's just go home."

Fujishima looked away. "I'm not going home."

"Keishi-san!" His mother said in a stern voice, and he reflexively started to tremble. "I told you I'd forgive you. Do you know how big of me that is? You need to stop this nonsense immediately."

His whole body began to tremble.

She straightened her kimono and smoothed back her hair. "Listen to me, now. Emi-san told me you were in this city, otherwise I never would have found you! I can't believe you came all this way...you must have been so scared that I was angry at you."

He couldn't believe her. He hadn't run away because he thought she was mad, he had run away to be with Tohru.

"Everyone makes mistakes, dear." She slowly shook her head. "My first marriage was a mistake. It's a shame what happened between you and Emi, but you're still young, you have plenty of time to start over. I'll find an even better person for you, and then you can have an heir to the Fujishima family..."

Heir...just the sound of the word made him dizzy.



"I'm not a machine that exists just to make grandchildren for you."

"Don't be ridiculous, of course you're not!"

But his mother didn't really understand.

"Come now, let's go home. You want to come home, right?"

Fujishima grabbed his mother's arm with trembling hands and brought her out into the hallway. Then he pushed her forward, went back inside and closed the door, then locked it. He tried to put the chain lock up, but his hands were trembling so hard he couldn't. His mother began to scream and pound on the door. He couldn't bear it anymore.

He clapped his hands over his ears.

"Open this door! Open this door right now!"

"No!"

His voice was weak. He wouldn't be manipulated by his mother anymore. Even if that meant being alone.

"Um, Fujishima-san..." Tohru said. "Are you okay?"

Fujishima should have been the one to ask him that. He saw that Tohru's cheek was bright red. He didn't want his mother to ever touch him again, and he felt terrible about it. He staggered over to him and touched his cheek softly.

"Does it hurt?"

Tohru blinked and shook his head. "She didn't hit me that hard."

"I'm so sorry." Fujishima sank to his knees and bowed his head. "I'm so sorry."

"I-It's okay. You don't have to apologize."

His mother kept pounding on the door. He felt like he was going to go crazy. He slowly stood up and grabbed Tohru's arm. "Come here..."

They went in the living room and closed the door. The sound of his mother's screams grew slightly quieter and Fujishima collapsed on the couch.

"I-I'm sorry about my mother. Sometimes she says crazy things."

Tohru didn't answer.

"She'll go home soon, so just leave her be. I'm really sorry, but until then can you stay in here? She becomes excitable..."

Fujishima went to his room. He slipped into bed and covered his ears. He could still hear his mother screaming. A few moments later there was a knock on his door.

"Hey," Tohru said, opening the door. Fujishima sat up in bed. "The landlord just called and said the neighbors are complaining about the racket coming from the hallway. Should I go talk to your mom?"

"N-No, you can't." He didn't know what she would do with just the two of them alone.

"But the landlord..."

Fujishima had no choice. "I'll go talk to her."

Tohru grabbed his arm. "Does she know me?" His grip tightened. "She said it was my fault that her family was ruined."

"It doesn't have anything to do with you. She's crazy."

His voice trembled.

"But I have a feeling she knows me."

He didn't know what to say. Tohru took his silence to mean he was right.

"I'm going to go talk to her. The neighbors will start to get angry at this rate," Tohru said.

Fujishima grabbed Tohru's sleeve. "Please don't."

"But..."

"Please, I'm begging you, stay away from her."

"But it's going to bother me..." While they were talking, her voice had grown quiet. They both sighed. The hallway was completely silent.

"Think she went home? I'll go look," Tohru said, but Fujishima stopped him.

"She might have just stopped yelling. She might be hiding somewhere."

"Is she that childish?" Tohru asked with a wry smile.

"I'll go check and see if she's gone. So just keep packing." Fujishima walked out into the hallway with unsteady legs and went up to the door. It was quiet outside. He slowly opened the door and looked out. He didn't see his mother. It seemed like she really had gone home. He was relieved. But he had a feeling she would be back. And it would be the worst timing ever if she came back in the morning when Tohru was moving out.

But what could he do? He didn't want his cowardice to endanger Tohru ever again.

"Can you move out earlier?"

Tohru looked at him with disbelief.

"What about today? Like right now?"

"There's no way I could get the movers on such

short notice. I don't think it's possible," Tohru said.

Fujishima didn't notice his dumbfounded tone of voice. "Okay...Well, if you're moving tomorrow then everything should already be on in your apartment. Why don't you go there tonight and I'll have your luggage delivered in the morning?"

"I haven't even gotten my key yet..."

It seemed like it was impossible for him to move today. In that case...

"There's that hotel nearby, right? Why don't you stay there tonight? Then tomorrow morning we can move you in. I'll pay for your hotel."

"No," Tohru said plainly. "Why should I go stay in a hotel?"

"Because..."

"You know, I loved living here. Can't I at least enjoy my last night here? Why are you trying to get rid of me all of a sudden?"

"That's not it at all..."

"Well, that's what it sounds like to me! Tell me what's going on. If you have a good enough reason, I'll go. If not, I'm staying."

The doorbell rang. Fujishima jumped and grabbed Tohru's hand. They ran to the hallway. Fujishima pulled him into his room and shut the door. The doorbell rang again.

"Are you sure you don't need to get it?" Tohru asked. "I doubt it's your mom again. Maybe it's a neighbor or the landlord."

"No. I don't want to get it." Fujishima leaned against the door. Tohru sat down beside him. The doorbell

rang once more, but after that it stopped.

"Are you scared of your mom?" Tohru asked.

"No..."

"Aren't you running away from her then, by not talking to her?"

"Can you be quiet, please?" Fujishima said in an irritated voice, and then said, "I'm sorry." They sat in silence for a while.

"Your mom looks a lot like you. She's pretty scary when she's mad, but she's pretty."

"She's ugly on the inside."

Tohru tilted his head. Fujishima realized that sounded terrible and then added, "She's not all bad... but there's just some parts of her I can't forgive." He brushed his hair out of his face.

"Do you want me to stay here longer?" Tohru asked, peering at his face. "Until your mom calms down?"

"You being here won't change anything."

Tohru looked hurt.

"I'd rather you left earlier. I need to find a new place, anyway."

"I thought you were going home?" At first Fujishima didn't realize his mistake, and Tohru continued. "Why do you need a new place?"

"W-Well, this place is really large..."

"I'm asking why you need a new place? Aren't you going home to your family?"

Finally he remembered that he had lied to Tohru about going home to his family.

"Um, that place is far away from work, so I thought

I'd find somewhere closer."

"Then why don't you have your family live here? You're not making any sense, Fujishima-san." His lie was being unraveled. "Your mom said something before about mistakes and that you could start over. What did she mean by that?"

"Who knows..."

"I..." Tohru bit the corner of his lip. "I forgot that you can lie with a straight face." He glared at him, then kissed him. He didn't have time to pull back. "I'm going to keep kissing you until you tell me the truth."

"S-Stop ..."

"If you don't tell me, I'll take it to mean that you want to kiss me."

Just as he said, Tohru kissed him over and over again. Fujishima didn't have time to speak.

Finally he got out, "Listen to me..."

"I don't want to listen to your lies."

Tohru was like a stubborn child.

"Please..."

"If you tell me the truth and answer my questions, I'll listen to you."

Finally the flurry of kisses subsided, but the sensations still remained. "Why do you want me to leave so suddenly?"

He couldn't answer.

"Why do you have to find a new place?"

He was asking questions he couldn't answer.

"For you..." he said weakly.

"You say it's for me, but that's not true. None of this makes me happy at all."

"That's not the issue, it's..."

"I..." Tohru started to say, then grabbed him by both of his shoulders. "I want to be with you forever." He stared at him with serious eyes, then looked away. "I want to be with you forever." He hugged him. Fujishima felt such affection for him as he buried his face in his chest...but he couldn't embrace him back.

"Why did you lie to me about going back to your family?" Tohru whispered. "You lied, didn't you?"

Fujishima said, "No..." in a weak voice.

"Then call them. Call your wife. And let them talk to me. Let me tell her you're going back to them after I move out." Tohru didn't sound like he was joking. "And if she tells me she knows, I'll tell her I've kissed her husband hundreds of times."

"Tohru!"

"Where's your cell phone?" Tohru stood up and walked over to his desk. Fujishima clung to him.

"Stop it."

Finally Tohru found his cell phone and pushed it towards Fujishima. "Call her."

Fujishima reluctantly took the phone and held it with trembling fingers.

"Come on, call her."

"I-I can't." Fujishima said.

Tohru took the phone back. "What's her number. I'll do it."

Fujishima shook his head. Tohru grabbed him by the shoulders.

"If you're not lying then prove it! I deserve to know the truth! You love me! Even knowing that, I

prepared to move out! If it's true that you're going home then I won't be mad. I won't tell her you kissed me. I'm not that mean. So..."

"I can't call her," Fujishima said.

"You can't call her, or you don't *want* to call her?" Tohru asked angrily.

Fujishima closed his eyes. "I-I don't know her number."

"What?" Tohru asked in disbelief.

"S-She said she moved away so it's probably changed. A-All I know is her bank account number..."

"What the hell are you talking about? Why her bank account number?"

"B-Because I deposit the child support every month..."

"Are you divorced?" Tohru asked.

Fujishima didn't have to answer to convince him that was so. "So then why did you lie and say you were going back to her? I know you love me, so why are you trying to get me to leave? Don't you want to be with me? Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is you! You don't remember anything!" Fujishima yelled, trembling. "You hated me so much, and you don't remember it!"

"Well, I can't help it if I don't remember anything!"

Fujishima got angrier.

"You wouldn't even talk to me! You say you love me now, but when you get your memory back you'll hate me again. You'll think I deceived you again."

"No, I won't."

"Even if you say so now, when you get your memory back..."

"It's not about getting my memory back! Why can't you see me as who I am now? Why do you hate me so much now? Why does it have to be the me before I lost my memory?"

He couldn't answer any of his questions. Fujishima's ears grew hot.

"That's not it. I'm afraid of..."

What *was* he afraid of?

"Why are you shaking?" Tohru stroked his cheeks gently. "What are you afraid of?"

Fujishima shook his head. Tohru placed both hands on his cheeks. "Are you afraid of me?"

Fujishima looked down. "If your memory comes back, you'll abandon me. And then it'll be like all this never happened. So I don't want you to love me. I don't want the memory of you loving me."

That should be all. He didn't want to be loved, he didn't want to be abandoned.

"I love you, I love you, I love you..." Tohru whispered in his ear.

"Stop it..." Tohru hugged him so tightly he could barely breathe. He repeated that he loved him over and over again in his ear. His large hands clutched at his back and pulled his shirt up from his pants. Fujishima started to tremble as Tohru's fingers traced his bare back.

"S-Stop it..." he pleaded, but Tohru didn't stop. "N-No, don't..."

He tried to twist his body away, but Tohru pinned him down. He pulled his shirt all the way up and teased

his nipples until they were hard. Then he reached down between his legs with one hand.

"D-Don't touch me there..."

Tohru's right hand grasped Fujishima.

"No, no, no!" Fujishima flailed around. But Tohru could tell he was enjoying it. His body was telling him. But he didn't want to be touched. He didn't want to know the pleasure of it. Tohru grabbed both his hands and put them above his head, pinning him down by his wrists.

"Let go!" But Tohru wouldn't listen to him. Now that he couldn't get away, Tohru's other hand was free to do as it pleased. Tears began to spill out of Fujishima's eyes and his body shook with sobs. "Please stop," he begged, but Tohru wouldn't.

"I'm not going to stop even if you cry."

Both his crying face and his erection were exposed to Tohru.

"No matter how much you cry or complain I'm going to touch you everywhere, lick you everywhere."

His fingertips lightly touched the corner of Fujishima's eyes. "I'm not going to stop."

Fujishima tried struggling one last time, but his efforts lost to Tohru's kisses.

He had come so much he had passed out, and he had cried so much his eyes were swollen. It felt like his head was stuffed with cotton. He couldn't think straight.

He couldn't think but his senses were heightened, and just the feeling of the sheets rubbing against his bare thighs made him tremble. Tohru was gone. He had left the room a few minutes ago. Fujishima sat up in bed and put a hand on his forehead. What should he do?

He heard a creaking noise as the door opened. Tohru was completely naked and held a cup in one hand. Fujishima looked away from his naked body. Tohru sat down on the edge of the bed, making the springs creak.

"Want some water?" he asked, holding the cup out. Fujishima looked at it and realized he was thirsty. He took the cup and drank it all in one gulp. He sighed. Just then, Tohru reached out and stroked the nape of his neck. Fujishima was so startled he dropped the cup.

"What are you doing?" Tohru asked, laughing and picked the cup up from the bed, setting it on the nightstand. Then he crawled into bed. Fujishima reflexively withdrew, but Tohru kept coming closer and they continued in this manner until Fujishima was up against the wall with nowhere else to go. Tohru murmured, "I love you," in his ear and then, "What are you going to do now? Abandon me?"

Fujishima looked up.

"Now you can't say you have no memory of me loving you." Tohru reached down and squeezed the tip of his penis with his fingers. "Even if you abandon me, this won't forget me. It won't forget how much I sucked it and how good I made it feel."

Fujishima pushed his fingers away and trembled. He'd be lying if he said the lingering sensations he felt weren't pleasure.

"You keep saying I'll leave you when I get my memory back, but that's not true, I won't," Tohru whispered. "Because I love you. No matter what the me before I lost my memory says, I'll convince him. I'll tell him I love you."

Fujishima shook his head.

"I love you more than anyone else in the whole world. Well, I don't know everyone in the whole world, but I love you the most. Even though you're a liar and stubborn and clumsy and love cakes."

He grabbed his arm and pulled Fujishima on top of him until he was sitting on his thighs.

"Why do you think I fell in love with you?" Tohru asked, a gentle look in his eyes.

"I don't know."

"Because you loved me. You're so kind to me, and that's why I fell in love with you. It's all your fault," he said teasingly. Then he embraced him. "Please let me love you. Let me be your lover. I'll treasure you. I'll be kind to you. So please let me protect you."

"N-No..."

"Why not?" Tohru asked. "Why not? Why can't you just say you love me?"

Fujishima shook his head like a stubborn child.

He was afraid of the uncertain future. He was afraid he'd be abandoned so he tried to run away. He didn't want to get hurt so he was trying to protect himself. But now those defenses had crumbled. Tohru had broken them down. He was afraid to have his true self exposed.

"Do you hate me that much?" Tohru asked, his voice suddenly cold. "Even though I tell you I love you,

it's no use? I guess you're really better off without me."

He turned his back. Fujishima didn't know what was going to happen next.

"I'm leaving. I'll stay in a hotel tonight, just like you told me to. Just show the movers where my boxes are."

Tohru got out of bed, gathered up his clothes and got dressed. "You'll probably never see me again, but that's what you wanted. Goodbye." Then he left the room.

The sound of the door slamming chilled Fujishima's blood. He couldn't believe he had just been left behind.

But Tohru had just told him he loved him. How could he leave him so easily? But this was what he had wanted. He had prepared himself for the day when they would part.

He curled up into a ball in the bed. His eyes were wet and he realized he was crying. He wondered why.

Suddenly a strong feeling rose up within him that made him tremble. He was swallowed up by a tide of emotion, and it was painful. He couldn't breathe. All he kept thinking over and over again was, "No." He didn't like that Tohru wasn't there with him, that he wasn't there to smile at him, that he wasn't there to tell him he loved him, that he wasn't there to comfort him.

But he had left. And he wasn't coming back. There was no point in being upset about it. Even though he told himself that, tears kept overflowing from his eyes. He wished someone would just kill him. He wished he could erase these feelings he had.

Suddenly he heard a loud noise. He jumped up

from bed. Maybe Tohru had forgotten something and came back?

If he didn't go after him now, he might never have another chance. He had to hurry or he'd leave. He stood up and went to the door with unsteady feet.

He opened the door and stopped. He saw Tohru sitting against the wall in the hallway with his knees to his chest. "Where are you going with no clothes on?" Tohru asked. "Bathroom?"

Fujishima's mouth twitched.

"What?" Tohru asked. He grabbed his ankle. Fujishima trembled.

"It's...painful being with you," Fujishima whispered. "But...it's painful being without you, too. What should I do?"

Tohru sighed and pulled Fujishima close to him.

"If you were going to come after me you should have come sooner. If I really had left it would have been too late." He nuzzled his cheek against Fujishima's swollen eyes. He gave him a light kiss on the lips.

He was afraid, but happy.

"Let's share our pain together," Tohru begged him. "Please let me stay with you."

Heat rose in Fujishima's chest, and he realized he was crying again. He wanted to be with Tohru no matter what.

"You don't have to cry so hard," Tohru murmured, holding Fujishima. "I'm sorry I made you cry. I made you cry so much today, please stop..."

They both slid to the floor, still embracing each other. Tohru pulled Fujishima onto his lap and stroked

his head like a child's.

"Tell me you love me instead of crying. Smile and tell me you love me."

Fujishima closed his eyes. He didn't want to let Tohru go. He wanted to be with him. If they were together, they could get through anything.

Even if Tohru's memory came back tomorrow and he asked to pretend like all this had never happened, he didn't care.

"I want to be stronger," Fujishima murmured, hugging Tohru. "I want to be stronger."

He wanted to be stronger than anyone. He didn't want to run away, he wanted to fight. He wanted his heart to win. So if some day when Tohru got his memory back and decided to leave him, he'd be strong enough to wish for his happiness.

He wanted the strength to confront his mother, too. He had been so scared of her, but he needed to stand up to her. He wanted to tell her he was staying with Tohru because he loved him, not because he pitied him. He wanted to tell her he had always loved him. Even if she judged him, at least he'd be telling the truth.

Please God, give me strength, Fujishima prayed. Please give me the strength not to regret this. Please give me the strength to love without hesitation.

Fujishima took his lover's right hand and placed it on his chest.

"Can I...tell you something?"

"Tell me what?" Tohru asked.

"We first met on a summer day..."

Fujishima closed his eyes as if remembering the



sound of the cicadas, and slowly began his story.

COLD LIGHT / END

Little Wish

On Sundays, Tohru always made cakes. Around three in the afternoon, the delicious smells would come wafting in from the kitchen. Sometimes Fujishima would watch Tohru from the couch as he made cakes.

One day Fujishima drifted off to sleep on the couch, and dreamt that he and Tohru were inside Hansel and Gretel's house made of candy.

"Dinner's ready, wake up," Tohru said, shaking him awake. Fujishima looked out the window and saw the sun setting in the western sky.

Dinner was fried fish and pot-au-feu. After they ate he stared absently at the news while Tohru cleaned up. Then he brought in a small tray.

"Here," Tohru said, putting the dessert in front of him. It was a small, light pink cake. On top were real cherry blossoms. "It's a sponge cake with cream and cherry blossoms inside," he said with a smile. "The old man told me not to get too carried away, but I wanted to make a real cherry blossom cake."

Fujishima cut a piece of cake off with his fork and ate it. He probably wouldn't have known it was cherry blossom if Tohru hadn't told him, but the elegant sweetness spread throughout his mouth.

"It tastes like I'd imagine cherry blossoms taste," he said honestly.

"Really?" Tohru asked, excited.

"It has a slight sweetness, and I can picture the cherry blossoms when I taste it."

Tohru smiled shyly and sat down beside him. "You always know how to flatter me."

"I'm not trying to flatter you..."

"The old man always criticizes my work so I'm always depressed when I come home, but then you always cheer me up and compliment me so I have the confidence to go back to work the next day!" Tohru grinned. He patted his lap. "Come here."

Fujishima glanced at him and then looked away. "I'm too heavy."

"No, you're not. You're light."

"But I'm eating."

"This is your reserved seat. I want to watch you eat."

"But..." he grumbled, but Tohru grabbed him and pulled him onto his lap anyway. He didn't want Tohru looking at him at such close proximity. He wouldn't be able to relax. At any rate, he wanted to hurry up and get it over with so he cut off a huge chunk of cake and shoved it in his mouth.

He chewed and chewed, making Tohru's shoulders shake with laughter. His face got bright red and when he glanced at him to see what he was laughing about, Tohru licked the corner of his lips.

"Mmm, sweet."

Fujishima quickly wiped the corner of his mouth. He didn't want to make the same mistake twice so this time he took a much smaller piece. He tried to concentrate

on the cake. Just as he thought he could enjoy it, Tohru stroked his back. "Hurry up," he said gently. "Hurry up and finish so I can kiss you."

But if he did so then Tohru would think he wanted to kiss him back. But if he ate slowly then Tohru would keep staring at him while he ate. He was faced with a dilemma and didn't know what to do.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" Tohru asked, peering at his face.

Fujishima was embarrassed. "Please don't ask me that," he pleaded. His fingers shook.

"I'm just joking. Take your time," Tohru said, shrugging his shoulders.

Fujishima finally finished his cake. Tohru took the plate and fork from his hand and kissed him. He shoved his tongue in his mouth.

"Mm..." he moaned at the sticky kiss. Wet noises filled the room. Their tongues intertwined. Fujishima felt light-headed.

His back shook and he wrapped his arms around Tohru. He smelled a light fragrance. Fujishima loved the sweet smell that came from his lover after he baked cakes.

After about fifteen minutes of kissing, Tohru was finally satisfied and stopped. He pushed his nose into Fujishima's chest. Fujishima licked his lips as Tohru couldn't see. If he saw him do that, he'd tease him and say he was asking for it or something equally ridiculous.

"Hey, I have something to ask you..." Tohru asked quietly, holding Fujishima's hand. He figured he was probably going to ask him to continue this in bed.

The previous summer when they had first become lovers, Tohru couldn't get enough of Fujishima and always wore him out. It's not that he didn't like it, but he just couldn't keep up with Tohru's young body. He was happy to be loved and he felt great pleasure at being licked and teased, but Tohru was never satisfied and before long Fujishima collapsed at work. The doctor said he was suffering from exhaustion, probably from a combination of the summer heat and lack of sleep.

Tohru felt so guilty about it that he reduced the number of times they did anything to only about two or three times a week instead of every day.

Since they had done stuff the previous day he wondered what Tohru wanted.

"What is it?"

"Um..." Tohru started. "You never bring work home, right?"

"Yeah, I don't like working at home." That was true, but really, he didn't want to take away from the time he could spend with Tohru at night.

"And at night you just want to relax and sleep by yourself, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I've never really thought too much about it."

"I started school, right?" Tohru said, squeezing Fujishima's hands. He had recently started going to night classes at a culinary school. "I work during the afternoon and go to school at night...it's a really tough schedule. But I like it, so I'm not really complaining about it..."

"You don't have to cook for me when you get home after such a hard day..."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about," Tohru said.

"I can eat by myself, you don't have to worry about it."

"That's fine, but I'm talking about something else."

"What?"

"I don't have enough of you," Tohru smiled. "By the time I get home I only have time to eat, take a bath and go to bed. Sometimes I don't get to see you at all."

It was true that their time together had decreased since Tohru had started school. Fujishima usually spent that time alone. He admitted that it did make him lonely, but there was nothing he could do about it, so he never felt like talking about it.

"I want to at least see your face once a day," Tohru said.

"I'm always awake when you come home, and I say good night..."

"Yeah, but that's not much," Tohru said.

Fujishima wondered if he meant he wanted at least a kiss or something. Tohru grabbed him around the waist.

"Your bed's big, isn't it?" Tohru asked.

"What about it?"

"It's probably big enough for me, too. And we sleep fine together, right?"

"What are you trying to say?"

Tohru bowed his head low. "Please let me sleep with you every night. Nothing to do with sex, I just want to be with you in some way since we don't have time

to talk much anymore. Can I? I want to see your face before I go to bed at night and when I wake up in the morning."

Fujishima didn't know how to answer. They usually slept together in Fujishima's bed after they did sexual things, but it wasn't every day. He didn't like the idea of someone seeing his stupid sleepy face all the time.

"Let me think about it."

Tohru slumped his shoulders and said, "Okay," in a defeated voice.

Fujishima was sorry he couldn't give him an immediate answer so he gave Tohru a kiss. Tohru looked surprised and smiled. "Don't worry about it," he said.

A little before midnight, Fujishima turned off the lights in his room. He had trouble falling asleep thinking about Tohru's request when he heard a knock on his door. "Are you already sleeping?" Tohru called hesitantly. He opened the door. "Can we talk a little? I promise I won't do anything," he said, and crawled into bed with him.

He told Fujishima about how ever since he started school he realized he wasn't as good as the other people in the class, and how he was the youngest one there... before long he fell asleep while Fujishima stroked his hair.

He closed his eyes. The reason he didn't turn off the bedside lamp was because he wanted to look at Tohru's face a little longer. He wondered why Tohru had felt the need to come in and vent to him that night, but he wasn't angry. He stared at Tohru's childish face. He still smelled like something sweet, and when Fujishima

reached down to lick the nape of his neck, he realized there wasn't a sweet taste there.

Lately Tohru wasn't bringing home cakes from the bakery, but cakes he himself had made. He was still a beginner, but his cakes were good, and he had definitely been getting better.

He felt bad for not answering Tohru's request. He never imagined he'd be this happy.

He slipped out of bed and opened the window. The cool night air rushed in. He climbed back in bed with his lover.

The previous summer Fujishima had told him everything about their past—everything. It had taken a long time, but Tohru had held onto him the entire time.

"Was I cute when I was little?" was the first thing Tohru asked him after his long confession.

"Yeah."

"I don't think it's right to make a move on kids, but I guess I must have been so cute you couldn't help it," he murmured, and kissed Fujishima on the cheek. "I'm a little jealous. I wish you'd make the first move again."

"Don't be ridiculous..."

"I'm not joking. I'm serious. I have a feeling I didn't used to hate you, Fujishima-san. I don't know why...I just do."

He didn't know why, but hearing that from Tohru made his feelings of guilt feel a little lighter.

The next day was the day Tohru was supposed to move out, but they spent the day like it was any other day. That afternoon, Fujishima's mother came to visit

again. He persuaded Tohru to stay in his room while he talked to her.

She wore an indigo kimono, as usual. At first she looked about her, but after she realized Tohru wasn't around she said, "I'm glad I don't have to see his face today." She sipped the tea Fujishima brought for her.

He could hear the sound of the cicadas from outside. Fujishima sat down across from her, but his fingers were trembling. He was always nervous in front of his mother.

"I'm sorry I was rude yesterday," he apologized.

"Yes, you were," his mother said, sighing. "But that's fine... I'll forgive you. You must have been surprised to see me so suddenly." She paused, and then started again. "By the way, I was talking to Hiroaki-san..." Hiroaki was his mother's new husband. "And he agreed to let you work at his company. It'll be the Tokyo branch, but that's closer to the house than here, anyway. You can live with us until you remarry."

"I have a job here."

"Yes, I know, it was in the report from the detective agency. It was a paper company, right? Why should you work at such a job when you managed a company before? Go work with Hiroaki-san and start studying business again. If you're up to it, he's agreed to gradually hand the company over to you."

"I'm satisfied with my job here."

"Satisfied?" his mother asked, raising an eyebrow. "Why should the heir to the Fujishima family work at such a place? You probably don't make much at that job either, living in such a small place..."

His mother looked around with sad eyes.

Fujishima didn't care if it was small, he felt more comfortable here than he had ever felt back home.

"I'm not going home."

Her expression changed.

"And I have no intention of working at his company. I'm going to live here with Tohru."

"Stop being ridiculous!" his mother yelled, and he jumped. "Why do you have to do as he says?"

"Tohru didn't tell me to do anything, this is my decision." He hesitated for a few moments, and then continued. "I love Tohru."

He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eyes.

"I love him."

After a long silence, Fujishima realized he was doomed. He didn't know what she was going to do next, but he braced himself for the worst.

He heard a small clattering noise and looked up. His mother raised her cup to her mouth and after taking a sip, said, "Everyone makes mistakes."

Fujishima leaned forward. "It's not a mistake."

"Keishi-san," his mother admonished him quietly. "You can start over even if you make mistakes. But if you don't realize the mistakes you're making, it can turn into something terrible."

"I slept with Tohru."

His mother's face tightened.

"I slept with him because I love him. I don't regret it, and it wasn't a mistake. I've loved him for a long time—"

"Stop it!" She interrupted him. She clapped a hand

over her mouth and stared at him with wide eyes. "D-Do you know what you're saying? I-If you admit to your mistakes, I'll forgive you. I'll forgive you!"

"I have nothing to be forgiven for. I love him."

His mother unsteadily got up from the sofa and started walking around it. She patted his hand and said, "I knew it. That boy is the devil. Look how he's brainwashed my precious Keishi-san! This is terrible. just terrible!"

"Mother."

His mother looked at him.

"You have to face reality. I'm not brainwashed. Please accept what I'm saying."

There was a long silence. Her frightened expression turned into one of sorrow. She touched his cheek with her white fingers. "I'll send someone for you tomorrow. Pack up your things and send in a letter of resignation to your company. You don't have to think about anything anymore. Just do as I say. All right?" She picked up her purse from the sofa. "I'm tired, so I'll be going home now. Let's talk about this tomorrow back at the house."

She was about to walk out of the living room when Fujishima chased after her. "Even if you send someone, I'm not going home. And I won't quit my job. I've made my decisions here. With Tohru, my job, this place. Even if it's not fancy, I like it here."

His mother ignored him and began to put on her shoes.

"I'm not your puppet, Mother."

Finally she turned around.

"So I won't do as you say anymore."

She looked up at him with a troubled look on her face. "You poor thing," she murmured.

After she went home he stood in the hallway for a while. The sound of the cicadas slowly brought him back to reality. He went back into the living room and collapsed on the couch. His mother's perfume still lingered in the air, making him feel sick. He retreated to his room and sat on the edge of his bed. There was a knock on his door. He didn't answer, but the door opened anyway. Tohru peeked in.

"Did your mom go home?"

"Yeah."

Tohru walked in. "Are you okay?"

"Why?"

"It sounded like you were fighting. Are you all right?"

Fujishima forced a smile. "Can you leave me alone, please?"

Tohru didn't move a muscle. Fujishima repeated himself.

"No, I want to stay with you. This has to do with me, too," Tohru said.

Fujishima shook his head. "Please, I want to be alone. This is between me and my mother."

"Don't keep it in all by yourself. You can rely on me. I want you to be able to talk to me when things are bad." He grasped Fujishima's hand with his large one. His hand was warm and comforting.

"She said, 'you poor thing,'" Fujishima said, his voice trembling. "She thinks I'm crazy. Even though I finally got up the courage to tell her the truth." He

hunched over. "She just completely rejected me."

Tohru squeezed his hand.

"I-It's my fault. I should have defied her more when I was young. I should have been more selfish. I should have let her know who I was as a person. That I wasn't just a doll for her to do whatever she wanted with."

Tohru nodded.

"But I was so scared of her, and I didn't want her to hate me..."

Tohru stroked his head and Fujishima looked up.

"It's not too late. You have plenty of time to talk to her. She'll come around," Tohru said. He hugged him gently. Fujishima quietly sobbed into his chest. Tohru gave him a comforting, gentle kiss. The next one was more passionate. Fujishima wanted to be held and didn't resist when Tohru took off his clothes. What he needed most right now was Tohru.

After that, he tried to talk to his mother many times. He told her he wouldn't break up with Tohru no matter what, and she would yell at him in her high-pitched voice. She even threatened to kill Tohru. Finally she said, "Let me take you to the hospital," and broke down crying.

Eventually she realized her son wasn't going to listen to her and she changed her tactics. This time she started to harass Tohru. She sent threatening letters to his work, writing about what a horrible person he was, and wrote terrible graffiti on the bakery window about him.

After she did those things, Fujishima went to see his mother and told her she needed to stop harassing

Tohru and that she owed him an apology. She slapped him and called him ungrateful. His cheek hurt, but his heart felt strangely calm.

Around three months later, he suddenly received a letter from his mother stating that she was disowning him. It said she no longer had a son, that he was dead to her. She never even tried to understand him, but instead just cut him out of her life. It made him sad, but it wasn't painful. Because he wasn't alone.

After that, he received a letter from his ex-wife saying his mother wanted custody of Maho. He felt badly that things had leaked over into his daughter's life. He told his mother to stop over and over again, but she kept contacting Emi. Eventually she gave up.

That spring Emi told him his mother had moved to France with her new husband.

Even thinking about his mother's tenacity made him shiver. Luckily he had Tohru to comfort him.

They lay in bed together one night, Tohru stroking his hand.

"What's wrong?" he said, as he noticed he was still awake.

"Nothing."

Tohru stroked Fujishima's cheek.

"Can't sleep?"

"Yeah."

"Because I'm here?"

"No, that's not it."

Tohru blinked sleepily. "You're pretty aggressive when I sleep in this bed, you know. You touch me and kiss me. Why is that?"

"B-Because you say all kinds of stuff."

Tohru tilted his head.

"Like, it makes you happy, or it feels good. I'm weak against that."

"Should I not say anything? Sometimes there are things people won't know unless they're said out loud."

Fujishima stared into his lover's eyes.

"Does it make you uneasy to not say it?"

"That's not it..."

"Don't you know that I love you without me having to say it?"

His lover's face reddened. He pushed Fujishima down onto the bed and sat on top of him. He brought his face closer to his own so they could kiss. Tohru kissed him hungrily, passionately.

Wet noises echoed throughout the bedroom. Fujishima couldn't stand it anymore and started to moan.

Tohru's large hands began unbuttoning Fujishima's pajamas. He pinched his nipples. Fujishima started to tremble.

"They're so cute and little...and hard."

"P-Please don't talk like that," Fujishima said, his face red.

Tohru flicked his nipple with his fingertip, sending a shiver down Fujishima's spine.

"They're telling me to touch them more." He squeezed his nipples between his fingers, making Fujishima moan again. He clapped his hands over his mouth.

Tohru narrowed his eyes happily. "I want to hear

you," he murmured into his ear. "I want to hear what you're feeling."

"N-No," Fujishima said, but Tohru peeled his hands away from his mouth. This time he flicked his nipples with his tongue, then nibbled them a bit.

"Mmmm, ahhhh, *ahhh*..." Fujishima moaned. All the heat in his body seemed to concentrate in one place, and perhaps because Tohru noticed it, his attention turned towards his pajama pants. He pulled them down to his ankles.

Fujishima felt himself growing hard. Tohru gently stroked the base of his cock.

"This is saying it loves me, too," Tohru murmured. Fujishima couldn't stand it anymore and tried to get off the bed, but Tohru pulled him back. "Where are you going?"

Fujishima shook his head.

"Are you sure you want to stop now? Even though you're so hard?"

Fujishima sat on the bed and held his head in his hands.

"Can't...we just do it like normal? Without having to talk?" He scooted up against the wall until there was nowhere left to go. He hugged his knees. Tohru put his hands on Fujishima's knees and spread them apart, exposing Fujishima's penis to Tohru's hungry eyes. Fujishima trembled and hid it with his hands.

"Why are you hiding it?"

He couldn't answer.

"You don't want me to look at it?" Tohru asked, and licked Fujishima's earlobe. He pressed his own

hard dick against Fujishima's hands. The tip of it was already wet. "Are you afraid to feel this?" Tohru stroked his cheek. "I know you feel a lot when I talk to you, but you don't seem to like it. It's like you're holding back. I've always felt that way." He kissed him. "I wish you'd just relax. If you were more honest about your body everything would feel so much better," he said, as he slowly pulled Fujishima's hands away. He pushed his penis up against Fujishima's, as if he were giving it a kiss with his own.

"I want you to tell me how good it feels. My dream is to hear you ask me to do it. So please let me have all of you. I'll make you feel so good you'll want to pass out. I'll make you come over and over again. I just want you to love me. I just want you to love it. Okay?" he whispered, and embraced him. He picked him up and laid him on his back, spreading his legs apart. He massaged his balls and gripped the tip of his cock. Then, without warning, he slid a finger into his asshole. Fujishima yelped and started to tremble.

"Does it hurt? It didn't feel like it resisted much."

Fujishima shook his head, which made Tohru shove his finger in even farther. He had fingered his asshole before and put his tongue inside too, but he felt like he would never get used to the feeling of something strange inside him. Tohru's long fingers played inside of him.

"I have three inside now," he murmured. "Can you feel it?" But the feeling was so intense that it was only a bit more painful than usual.

After Tohru played around a bit, he finally hit the

spot Fujishima had been waiting for. His body trembled and pre-cum started dripping from the tip of his cock.

"That feels good, doesn't it? Is it throbbing?"

He felt like he would explode.

"S-Stop."

"What? But doesn't it feel good?"

He was embarrassed. But he didn't have time to hesitate to say what he was going to next. "I-I'm going to come."

"What?" Tohru asked.

"I...I'm going to come."

Tohru smiled and murmured into his ear, "Then come. Press your cock against my stomach and blow it all over me."

Fujishima was so embarrassed, but just at that moment he exploded.

"Ahhh...ahhhh!" he moaned.

His whole head went blank and his entire body quivered. After his tremors subsided, fatigue seized him and his whole body relaxed. He leaned against Tohru and panted. He felt wetness in between his asscheeks. He looked down and felt something hot pressing against his asshole.

"I want to put it inside of you."

Fujishima looked timidly at it. He had had Tohru's fingers and tongue inside, but not his cock yet.

"I-It's big..."

Tohru laughed. "Nah, it's not that much bigger than three of my fingers inside of you. You felt really loose tonight, so let me put it in."

"But..."

"I've wanted to for so long now. But we weren't used to it...if it hurts I'll stop, I promise."

He couldn't refuse after Tohru said that to him. Fujishima nodded slightly. But he was afraid and suddenly yelled, "No!" and clung to Tohru's neck. Tohru kissed him softly and tilted him back onto the bed. Fujishima felt pressure and pain near his asshole.

He clutched onto Tohru, and in a few moments he heard, "I'm inside of you...can you tell?"

Fujishima shook his head. Tohru grabbed his right hand and guided it down beneath his balls.

"Feel it."

Fujishima did as he said, and realized he was stretched out more than he ever thought he was capable and had taken in all of Tohru's dick. He felt dizzy. Tohru panted.

"It feels so good," he moaned into Fujishima's ear. "It feels so good...it's so tight and hot."

He kissed him all over and played with his nipples. Fujishima arched his back, which changed Tohru's position inside of him slightly. After they embraced for a few moments, Tohru slowly began to move in and out. This was different than pressure, more like a rubbing sensation. It made Fujishima's knees tremble. Honestly, it was painful, but it was a pain that was closer to pleasure.

"You're so beautiful," Tohru murmured as Fujishima trembled.

"You're so beautiful, Fujishima-san."

Fujishima knew his panting face was ugly. He hid it from Tohru. "Don't look at me."



"Why not? Don't hide it, let me kiss that pretty face."

"Don't say my ugly face is pretty."

"But it is. I love your sexy mouth and your wet red eyes. I love how you tremble beneath me. I want to hold you all night."

He grabbed Fujishima's cock and pushed himself in as far as he could. "Ahhh!" Fujishima moaned.

"My lover has the prettiest face in the world." Tohru repeated over and over again like it was some sort of spell. After moving in and out for some time, he finally released his pleasure deep inside of him. At around the same time Fujishima came again onto Tohru's stomach. Then he fell asleep into a pure white ocean of pleasure.

When he woke up from his light sleep, he realized they were glued together. The room was dark so he couldn't see the clock, but it looked like it was still night outside beyond the curtains.

His asshole still throbbed from Tohru's actions. When he moved his hips a sharp pain raced through him. He wondered why, and when he stretched his hand down he realized Tohru was still inside of him. He was unbelievably embarrassed and pulled his hips away. It hurt so badly, as if his body didn't want Tohru to get out of it. When he was finally all the way out, an empty, lonely feeling overcame him.

He thought it was strange to feel that way and

cuddled back up to Tohru. But since he was fast asleep, Tohru didn't hug him back.

He wanted to wake him up and tell him to hold him, but he didn't want to bother his sleeping lover. Unlike himself, Tohru had to work the next morning. But even still, he wanted to be just a little selfish.

He didn't know what to do with the feeling of loneliness that overcame him. He was used to sleeping alone. It wasn't like they fell asleep holding each other every night, so he should have been able to bear with it. He wasn't aroused anymore, but he still felt the lingering sensations of their love.

He faced his sleeping lover and traced his soft cheek with a trembling finger. He rubbed his bare shoulders. Then he put his head against Tohru's head and cried a little. He was lonely, but he had never been happier, either. He loved him so much and was so lonely he couldn't help but cry. Was he really happy? He stared out into the dark night and wished he could freeze time.

The next morning he could barely walk. Somehow he changed clothes, washed his face and went to the kitchen, but he had no appetite and it was too painful to sit at the dining room table. He munched on some toast and had some coffee, then lay down on the couch in the living room. Tohru came in and started pacing around him.

He still didn't leave for work when it was time

for him to go, so Fujishima said, "Shouldn't you get going?"—but Tohru told him he had taken the day off because Fujishima wasn't feeling well.

"I'm fine, you can go to work," he said, but Tohru wouldn't listen to him.

His lower back hurt, but it wasn't like he couldn't walk at all. But still he remained on the couch. Tohru stayed by his feet the whole time. He hung his head like a child awaiting punishment. It was kind of cute.

They made eye contact. "I'm sorry," Tohru said, looking away. "You must be mad at me." He held his head in his hands.

"Even though I said I wouldn't do anything, I did it. And then I pushed you too hard. In the middle of it I thought I should go easy on you, but I just couldn't stop myself. I promise I won't ever do that again."

It hurt and his body ached, but he didn't dislike it. But he felt like Tohru would never make love to him in that manner again.

He had asked him the day before if he wouldn't know certain things unless he told him. He remembered Tohru's unhappy face. Maybe sometimes he did have to communicate for his partner to understand him. Maybe that's all he had wanted?

"It might be hard during the week, but it's fine if it's on the weekend like today."

Tohru turned around with a look of disbelief on his face. "Really?"

"But go a little easy on me next time."

"I will. I won't be that rough again, I swear." He smiled a little. Fujishima smiled too.

Tohru leaned over and kissed him. The night before he had been quite brazen with his passionate kisses, but he seemed a little shy kissing him in broad daylight.

Fujishima took Tohru's right hand and placed it on his chest. Tohru stroked Fujishima's hair. Fujishima smiled with happiness. Pleasure and comfort soaked into his whole body.

He suddenly remembered Tohru asking him if they could sleep together. He had deferred answering, but Tohru hadn't asked again. Maybe he would forget about it unless he brought it up. Or maybe he had simply given up.

Before, he had felt embarrassed at the thought of someone seeing him sleep every single night. But now it was different. Fujishima hugged Tohru tightly. If he could be held by these arms every night and feel these gentle touches every night, he wanted to sleep together.

"Starting tonight, let's sleep together, okay?"

"Are you sure?" Tohru asked, surprised.

"I want to sleep with you. So that's why I'm asking you."

Tohru covered his face, which had turned bright red. "Don't invite me with that look on your face!"

"Why?"

"I-It makes my heart pound! I've been a mess ever since yesterday!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I love you."

Tohru pressed his head into the couch shyly. Then he hugged Fujishima tightly. Fujishima closed his eyes and made a wish:

"Please let us be together forever. Please let us love each other forever."

LITTLE WISH / END

New Year Snow Light

The jumbo screen in front of the train station suddenly showed a young man in loose clothes and a nose ring counting down from ten. As he counted down to zero, loud noises went off, and then the screen changed again to images of people celebrating.

Yuichi Kurokawa glanced at his watch. He'd been waiting for his lover for close to forty minutes now.

It wasn't snowing, but the air was as cold as ice. His breath was white. He pulled up the collar of his long black cashmere coat and rubbed his black leather gloves together.

He had called his cell phone three times. The phone was still turned off. No matter how long he waited, he didn't think for a second that his lover had stood him up or forgotten about him. If he hadn't wanted to go, he never would have agreed to it in the first place, and he had never forgotten about a date before. But he was just a little careless and had forgotten to turn his phone on. Or maybe his battery was dead.

Yuichi had been the one who said he wanted to do Hatsumode together this year.

After he had brought it up, his lover made a vague face so Yuichi quickly said, "If you're busy with work, forget about it."

"Well, there's work, but Hatsumode is the pits.

There's so many people and they spill coffee on your new jeans, and..."

"I guess you're right." Yuichi wondered who else his lover had gone with, but he didn't ask him. He had gone out with many women before him, but he was approaching thirty so that was normal.

Yuichi himself had dated one girl in high school, but since then hadn't had a proper lover until his current boyfriend.

"Do you want to go?"

"Well, it'll be crowded, so..." Yuichi muttered.

"Do you wanna go or don't you?"

"I wanna go," Yuichi answered quietly.

"Then why didn't you just say so in the first place?" his boyfriend said, snorting. "Fine, let's go. But I have to work until evening that day, so if that's okay we can go. Which temple should we go to?"

Yuichi was happy and scared at the same time, and chose the temple nearest his apartment for them to visit.

After his boyfriend, Masayuki Taniguchi, got off work he was supposed to get on the train. Yuichi heard the rattling of the train from a distance. He pulled up his collar and looked at his watch. It was 12:10. He hoped maybe he was on this train and waited by the platform, but there was no sign of Masayuki.

He sighed, and went to wait by the ticket counter. The trains were running late since it was New Year's, but the last train of the night was the next one at 12:40.

Maybe he had been too busy with work. Unlike a regular 9-5 job, Masayuki's schedule was always different because he was a photographer.

He was getting too cold just standing around, so he wandered around the train station. The nearby café that was open 24 hours looked warm and inviting. An employee invited him to come inside to wait, but he had to make sure Masayuki could find him. He didn't want him to not be able to find him; he might get angry.

He looked down and hunched his shoulders. He saw something white fall on the pavement, one after another. When he looked up, he saw that it was snowing.

If he stood here all night he might become a snowman. Just thinking about it made him smile a little. Even if he became a snowman, he'd wait until Masayuki came. He'd wait no matter what.

He saw someone running towards him from far away. He had a feeling it was Masayuki and started to take a few steps forward. He saw the person fall down, and then get back up again. Yeah, it was Masayuki.

"I'm so sorry I'm late!" he said, panting. His cheeks were red and the knees of his jeans were dirty from falling down.

"A-Are you okay?" Yuichi asked.

"Eh, I just tripped over a rock. It's not a big deal. I'm just really sorry...I'm a half hour...no, an hour late now. I'm really sorry."

"It's fine, don't worry about it."

Masayuki touched his cheek. His finger was still warm. "Liar. Look how cold you are. Work was running late and I missed the 10:30 train. I thought I'd be late if I took the next train so I thought about taking a cab, but I didn't have the money for it so I went to the Iwabashi stop and took that one, but the streets were so crowded it

took me forever to get here," he explained, still panting. "I was gonna call you on the way here, but I looked down and saw my battery was dead. I haven't run this fast since I was in high school. And I fell down too, what an idiot. That's why I hate Hatsumode so much! Nothing ever goes right for me."

"S-Sorry." All Yuichi could do was apologize.

"It's not your fault. It's my problem. Well, shall we go?" He held out his arm.

"No, let's forget about it." Yuichi turned around.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Just forget about it. If you don't want to, let's just go home."

"I hurried here because *you* wanted to go so bad!"

Yuichi didn't want to make Masayuki upset, so that's why he suggested going home, but it seemed like he was getting upset anyway.

"This is ridiculous. Who do you think I ran all the way here for?" Masayuki looked and sounded angry. Yuichi felt depressed.

Yuichi grabbed his arm and dragged him over to a corner, then hugged him tightly.

"Idiot, let go!" Masayuki yelled, but he wouldn't let go. After a while he calmed down.

"Don't get mad," he pleaded. "Please don't get mad."

"Then don't make me mad!"

Even though he had no idea what had made him mad in the first place, Yuichi agreed. "Okay."

"Let's go."

"I don't want to go to Hatsumode anymore."

"Listen..."

"Because you're cold," he said, his breath white.

"You're really cold, so I want to take you home."

Their eyes met.

"Liar. I ran all the way here, I'm not cold."

"But your clothes and hair are cold."

Masayuki furrowed his brow, and then finally sighed. "All right," he murmured. "If you insist, let's go back to your place."

Yuichi's apartment was only about ten minutes from the train station. He walked a little behind Masayuki as they made their way through the crowds. Yuichi suddenly felt uneasy. He reached out a hand to touch Masayuki, then took off his glove, shoved it in his pocket and touched him with his bare hand.

Masayuki didn't say anything even when he held his hand. He didn't get mad when they walked side by side. They walked through a deserted park, quietly holding hands. Snow fell down gently, and even though he felt unbelievably cold, his hands felt warm.

"I thought you'd get pissed I was late and go home, otherwise I wouldn't have run," Masayuki grumbled. He squeezed Yuichi's hand, and then said as if to change the subject, "T-There's a convenience store over there. Let's buy something. I wanna eat something warm," and pulled him towards it.

He's gotten better at kissing and sex, Masayuki thought as he gazed at Yuichi beside him. At first it had been like kissing a dog, but eventually he started to follow his lead.

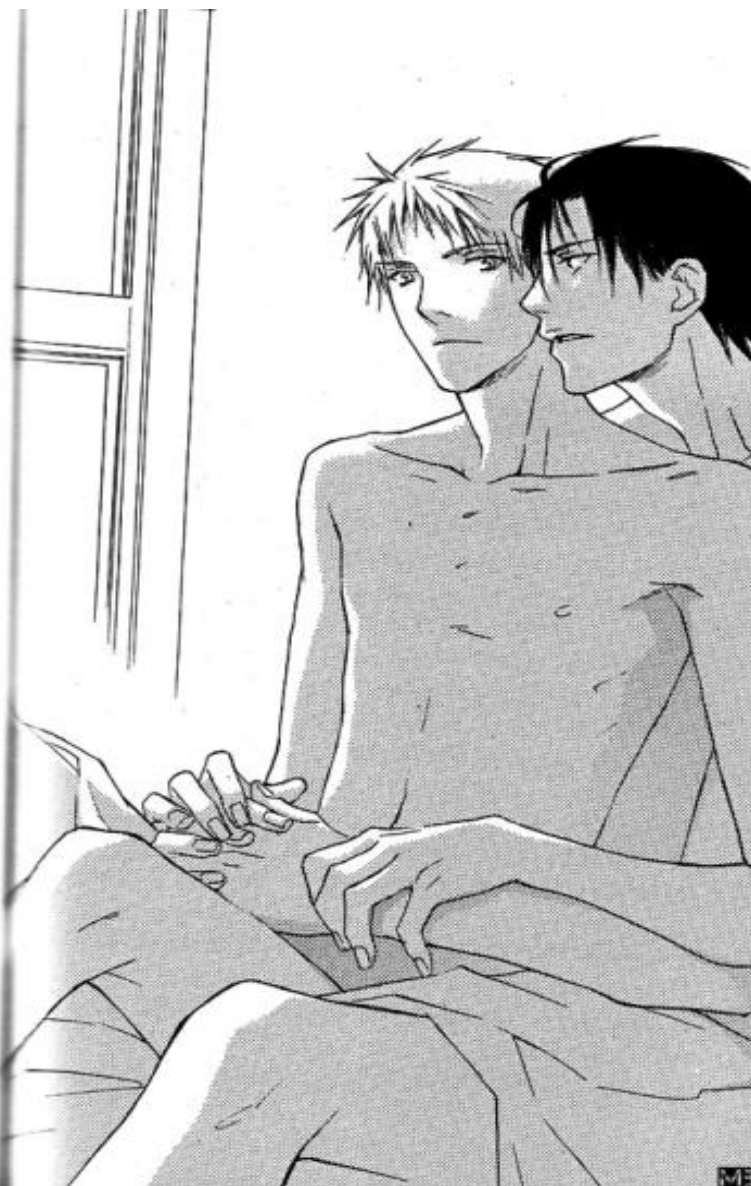
He stared at Yuichi's face as he slept, and thought about how handsome he was. He thought he was even more handsome now than when they first met, although that was probably because he had fallen in love with him.

Staring at him, he felt himself wanting to do it again. But he couldn't wake him up and say so. Instead, Masayuki buried his face in the sheets. They smelled fresh. Whenever he came to Yuichi's apartment, the sheets always smelled like they'd just been washed. His place was always neat and comfortable. Masayuki's favorite place was Yuichi's simple brown leather sofa.

He didn't think he'd fall for him so hard. At first they were just friends, but gradually he found himself wanting to sleep with him. He still wondered why that was, but he didn't know. He had just fallen in love with him.

He knew Yuichi was trying to be a better person, but he knew it wouldn't happen overnight. It would take time. But lately he was satisfied with how things were going. Even if he had terrible willpower and was indecisive, he couldn't dislike a man who put his whole heart into everything.

Yuichi opened his eyes, and then turned over, falling back asleep. Masayuki remembered it had been snowing since they were at the station. He wondered how much it had snowed, sat up in bed and pulled back



the curtains a little. It was really coming down now. Just as he thought how cold it looked out there, he trembled.

"What are you doing?" a sleepy voice asked from behind him.

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you?"

Yuichi sat up slowly and rubbed his eyes like a child.

"It's really snowing out there! It's like a blizzard. a blizzard!"

Yuichi grabbed him around the waist from behind and hugged him. Masayuki's cold body instantly warmed up.

"You're right—it's crazy out there."

They both absently stared at the snow.

"Oh yeah, I forgot," Yuichi yelped, making Masayuki jump. "Happy New Year!" he said, and nuzzled Masayuki's cheek.

"Yeah, Happy New Year," Masayuki answered with a wry smile.

"I want us to be together next New Year's and the next one and the next one..." Yuichi murmured, hugging Masayuki.

Masayuki thumped him on the shoulder. "That depends on how good you are!"

"I'll do my best," Yuichi promised.

Then they both crawled back under the sheets, and kissed each other over and over again.

NEW YEAR SNOW LIGHT / END

Red Flower

Fujishima walked quickly in the cold, burying his face in his scarf. Only a few more minutes until he was home. Usually he wouldn't care so much, but tonight was exceptionally windy and cold.

Even though it was only eight p.m., there weren't many people walking about. That seemed to make the atmosphere even colder.

His fingers trembled, even though he wore leather gloves. He rubbed his hands together, making him drop his briefcase he had wedged under his armpit. He bent over to pick it up, when he noticed it was snowing. He hadn't realized it was that cold yet.

He wanted to hurry to his warm home, so he started to run. As he reached the front of his apartment building, he noticed the lights were off in his condo.

He unlocked the door and went in. It was completely dark. He didn't hear anything. He turned on the hallway light. He didn't see Tohru's shoes. He must not be home yet.

He locked the door and took off his shoes. He walked through to the living room, turning on lights as he went. He turned on the heater, but it would take a while for the heat to circulate through the large living room. He set his bag on the floor and sat down on the couch, sighing.

He was still cold, so he didn't take off his scarf. He stared at the TV absently. He remembered that he forgot to buy himself dinner. He didn't want to go out, either. He just wanted to take a shower and go to bed. But if he didn't eat anything he might wake up in the middle of the night starving...

He wondered if there was anything in the fridge, but he couldn't remember. He wondered when Tohru would be home, or if he would be home at all.

Tohru was really busy during Christmas and New Year's, and sometimes would work all through the night. Fujishima would feel him crawl into bed with him late at night, but when he woke up the next morning he'd already be gone. That had been going on for about a month now.

This year was especially busy for Tohru because he had entered a baking contest at a hotel. The prize was that the hotel would pay tuition to study cooking aboard. Tohru had mentioned again and again that he would love the opportunity.

Tohru was very busy making cakes. He would stay at work baking them until late and bring them home for Fujishima to taste.

Even Fujishima, who loved cakes, couldn't eat a whole cake every day, so he brought them to work. The female employees loved them, and they even served them to clients.

It had been six years since Tohru lost his memory. He had graduated from culinary school and was working as an apprentice pâtissier at a hotel restaurant. He had planned to work at the bakery "Port," where he got along

so well with his boss, but he had been turned down. Tohru was devastated, but Fujishima realized the boss had done it so Tohru wouldn't give up the chance of being able to study at a higher-level restaurant. He thought Tohru secretly understood that, too.

For a while Tohru lost his way, and had been depressed when he first started his job. But now he no longer complained. He was doing well at work, but Fujishima still felt lonely.

Today was Fujishima's 34th birthday. He had forgotten about it himself until yesterday when a co-worker reminded him of it.

Every year on Fujishima's birthday, Tohru would take the day off and bake him a whole cake. Sometimes it was as elaborate as a three-tiered cake, and sometimes it was a simple cheesecake with an intricate design on it.

But this year Tohru didn't take the day off. He was so busy at work, maybe he had forgotten. He hadn't mentioned anything about baking a cake or celebrating, either. But Fujishima hadn't reminded him, so he couldn't really complain about it. It wasn't a big deal. Even though they were lovers, it wasn't like the honeymoon period could last forever. As long as they could be together, he didn't mind.

Finally the room warmed up, and he took off his scarf and coat. He felt like having a drink. He took a bottle from the sideboard. He was just about to put some ice in a glass when his cell phone rang. It was Tohru.

"Hello?"

"Ah, Fujishima-san." No matter how long they

had been together, Tohru wouldn't call him by his first name.

"What's up?"

"I'm at work right now," Tohru said, breathing hard. "And I can't get out. I forgot something at home and I really need it. I don't have time to go pick it up."

"Want me to bring it for you?"

"Could you? I'm really, really sorry. It's in a paper bag on my bed. Call me as soon as you get to the hotel and I'll come out and get it. I'm really, really sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

He hung up the phone and stood up. He put his coat and scarf back on. He looked at the bottle of liquor, thought a moment and took off the cap. He took a few swigs of it straight from the bottle. He was happy that he could see Tohru tonight, but it looked *really* cold outside.

The paper bag was really large, but surprisingly light. Whatever was inside made a rustling noise. It was closed with tape so he couldn't see what was in it, but he was very curious. His body was warm from the alcohol he had drunk before he left the house. The trains were still running, but Tohru seemed like he needed this item in a hurry so he took a taxi.

"Cold out there, huh?" the elderly driver said.

"Yes, it is," Fujishima answered, staring absently at the white landscape.

"I can't stand the cold. When it's all icy out I tend to slip," the taxi driver said, making small talk. Perhaps he was lonely.

Fujishima felt tired from the alcohol and the warmth of the car and drifted off to sleep. He was awakened by the driver telling him he was at his destination. He went inside the hotel and his phone rang.

"You got here fast, Fujishima-san."

"Really? Oh, because I used a taxi."

"Ahh, sorry! Well, come into the hotel and go up to room 3045 and knock on the door."

There were many luxury rooms at this hotel. Fujishima had stayed in a few of them when he worked at Nagiryu. He didn't know how much the rates were nowadays, but he was sure it was really expensive. He was a little nervous going up to one of those rooms.

He rode the elevator up. There was no one in the hallway. The dark green carpeting absorbed the sound of his footsteps. Finally, he reached room 3045. He knocked on the door and heard a noise from within. He heard someone fumbling with the lock.

The door swung open. Tohru wore a black sweater and jeans. He thought he would be in his work uniform so he was surprised.

"Thanks, sorry about that."

"It's all right." He handed him the bag. "Looks like you're busy with work. Don't strain yourself, okay?"

"Um..."

"Well, see you," Fujishima said, about to turn around. Tohru grabbed him.

"Come in."

"Isn't there someone else inside? I don't want to interrupt your work."

"Just come inside." Tohru pulled him into the room. The thick carpet was beige. There was a flawless mirror and a solid oak cabinet. It was a simple room, but it had an elegant, chic design. The curtains were pulled back all the way so he could see the snow falling outside. No one else was in the room. "Come here."

He led Fujishima over to two beds that were side by side, and Fujishima caught his breath. On the bed nearest to the window, "Happy Birthday Keishi" was spelled out in red rose petals. Fujishima turned bright red with happiness and embarrassment. It looked like a honeymoon suite.

"Happy birthday. Are you surprised?"

"Didn't you have to work today?"

Tohru shrugged. "I had to tell you that so I could prepare things here. I'm sorry I made you pay for a taxi." He hugged him from behind and kissed his neck. "Happy 34th birthday."

Tohru smelled like chocolate.

Fujishima was happy, but he felt like he was going to cry.

"I didn't think you'd remember this year."

"What? Why?"

"Because you've been so busy."

"That's terrible!" Tohru said, shaking him slightly. "I'd never forget your birthday! It's a special day for me. We always celebrate it at home so I thought I'd do something different this year. My co-workers helped me."

He stood away from Fujishima and tore open the paper bag. There was a white package wrapped in red ribbons inside.

"Here's your present."

"Thanks." He took the box. He opened it and saw a white scarf inside. It was light and warm, cashmere.

"I didn't know what to get you this year, so I wanted to get you something you could get a lot of use out of. I wondered what color to get, but I thought white would look good."

Tohru took the scarf out of the package and wrapped it around Fujishima's neck. The scarf turned bulky and buried Fujishima's neck.

"Huh? But it looked so cool on the display..."

No matter how it looked, it was really warm. Fujishima smiled while Tohru apologized.

"Come here," Tohru said, urging him over to the couch. There was another large white box on the table. Tohru got some champagne glasses and filled them. "Happy birthday!" he cried as he opened the box.

There was a pure white cake inside. It looked fluffy like sheep's wool. Red flower petals decorated it.

"It's beautiful," Fujishima murmured, making Tohru grin with delight.

"Those flower petals are edible."

"Really?"

"I looked all over for edible red flower petals. I wanted to put them on the cake really bad."

They clinked their champagne glasses together in a toast. It was like a whole different world inside the warm room in contrast with the blizzard-like snow outside.

Tohru cut the cake, and put a piece on a plate for him. "Oops!" he said suddenly.

"What?"

"I forgot the forks! Aw man, and I thought everything was perfect! Now I can't feed you!"

Fujishima grew bright red.

"What's the matter?"

"Well..."

"What, don't tell me you get embarrassed when I feed you? But we always do it at home..."

"I'm a little drunk from the champagne..."

"You haven't even had half your glass! Are you that much of a lightweight?"

He remembered he had had some whiskey back home.

"I drank a little before coming here."

"Really?"

"It...was cold outside."

"I'm sorry I called you here in such terrible weather," Tohru apologized.

"I took a taxi, so I was fine."

Tohru looked at him with concerned eyes. "Are you mad at me?"

"Why do you think I'm mad?"

"I don't know, I just have a feeling."

"No, I'm not mad. I'd never get mad at you."

"Yeah, you do!"

"I do not."

"You were really mad when I hurt my leg when we went camping!"

"No, I was just worried about you."

Tohru laughed. "You're cute when you're angry."

Fujishima covered his face with his hands.

"Don't, I said you're cute!"

"You shouldn't say that to a man who just turned 34."

"No matter how old you are, you'll always be cute, Fujishima-san. I'll keep saying it, too."

"Please don't."

"Why not?"

"Because it'll be too sad when you stop saying it someday." Fujishima realized what he had just said and was embarrassed.

Tohru touched his hair.

"I'll say it for the rest of my life. I'll tell you you're cute forever."

"It's fine, don't worry about it."

Tohru hugged him, and again he felt like he was going to cry. He shouldn't have drunk so much. He thought he was fine...he thought he'd be fine even if Tohru had forgotten his birthday, but he wasn't after all.

He didn't want him to see his face, but Tohru pulled him in for a kiss. His kisses were warm and a little dry. Tohru thrust his tongue into his mouth and Fujishima opened his mouth wider to let him in. Tohru's tongue intertwined with his.

It felt like Tohru's tongue was filling up his whole mouth, and Fujishima felt a sensation like he was drowning.

"Can I eat you on your birthday, Fujishima-san?" Tohru asked in a teasing voice.

"If I tell you no, will you still do it?"

"Yes."

Fujishima laughed.

"Can I eat you up right now?"

"I want to take a shower first. I haven't taken one yet today."

Tohru stood up from the sofa and grabbed Fujishima's hand. He pulled him up and Fujishima figured he was going to take him to the shower, but instead he pushed him onto the bed with the rose petals on it.

The rose petals bounced up from the bed, and one fluttered down on Fujishima's forehead. Tohru had a rose petal in his mouth and leaned down and kissed Fujishima with it.

"You're so violent," he murmured. Tohru started taking off Fujishima's clothes even though he hadn't taken a shower yet.

"Is it okay?" Tohru asked.

Fujishima nodded.

Fujishima opened his eyes to the sound of water. He suddenly remembered he was in the hotel room. He slowly sat up in bed, and looked at the bed next to him. It was pure-white and clean. Then he looked down at the bed he was in and saw the sheets were stained red. At first he thought he was bleeding, but then realized they were stains from the red rose petals. He looked around and didn't see Tohru. Most of the rose petals were gone.

He wondered if Tohru had gone to clean them up.

He could see the snow falling outside the window.

The sound of the water stopped.

"Oh, are you awake?" Tohru called, standing in the doorway. He was completely naked. Even though they had just had sex, Fujishima looked down. "Wanna take a bath? The water's warm."

"O-Okay."

Fujishima looked around for something to cover up with, but his clothes were over by the sofa. Tohru was completely naked, but he still felt like it was weird not to cover up with something. He stood up from the bed, his knees wobbling. He thought he would fall down, but Tohru rushed over and grabbed him.

"Are you okay?"

He thought he was getting used to this, but apparently his body disagreed. Tohru supported him and they took small steps. Suddenly he picked him up.

"Huh?"

"I'm gonna carry you."

"I can walk!"

"Just let me."

Tohru started to walk, so Fujishima clung onto his neck. Tohru kicked the bathroom door open. The bathtub was filled with rose petals.

He set him down in the bathtub, making the petals swirl in the water. Tohru got in with him. The water overflowed a little, making some of the petals spill out.

Tohru came closer to him and hugged him around the waist.

"The rose petals are beautiful," Fujishima whispered.

"Really? I thought you might not like them."

"They're beautiful."

He picked up a petal from the water.

"I love your birthday. Now I can be with my lover in a bath full of rose petals." Tohru scooped some water up in his hands and dumped it over Fujishima's head until his hair was wet.

"You're gonna make me all wet, stop!" Fujishima complained, but Tohru grabbed him by the waist and set him on his lap. Their bodies pressed together in the red water.

"Sorry I made you wet," Tohru said, holding Fujishima's face with both hands. "Actually, I wanted to see your face wet."

"It doesn't look that different when it's wet."

"Yeah it does. It looks very sexy."

Tohru kissed him. His lips weren't dry anymore. Even though Fujishima had come several times, he felt a twinge down there.

"Do you like it when I kiss you?" Tohru asked. Fujishima figured Tohru realized the change in his body. Fujishima's penis was pressing up against Tohru's belly. Fujishima nodded. "I like it, too."

Tohru pressed his own hardness against Fujishima, who twitched. "Please don't put it in again."

"Why not?"

"I have to work tomorrow."

"Can I put my finger in?" Tohru asked with sweet eyes. "Just one finger?"

"But then it'll only make me feel good." That wouldn't satisfy Tohru.

"I'll feel good watching you feel good. So let me put my finger in."

Fujishima couldn't say no. Tohru's thin, long finger pushed inside of him. He kept it still for a few moments, and then started to move it.

"Ahh, don't move it too much, water will get in."

"Yeah, I know..."

Tohru stroked his back.

Fujishima felt dizzy with pleasure. He should have been satisfied, but he was filled with lust. He wanted something bigger than Tohru's finger. He wanted something to spread him as far as he could go. But he couldn't tell him that after he had just asked him not to put it in. Fujishima thrust his hips in time with Tohru's movements.

"Fujishima-san," Tohru whispered. "Do you want me inside of you?"

Fujishima gritted his teeth.

"Once I started, you wanted it, didn't you? It's okay, I'll be gentle. You're used to my cock, anyway," he whispered soothingly, and took his finger out and drew him closer. Tohru entered him, and was gentle just like he said he would be. He stayed still without moving. It was Fujishima who started moving his hips.

"Fujishima-san, do you love me?" he asked, while he was inside of him. "Do you?"

"I wouldn't do this with someone I hated."

"I guess you're right," Tohru said, nibbling on his ear. "You know that contest I entered? Well, I won."

"You won?"

"I'm going to France next April for a year."

Fujishima couldn't believe it. Tohru's dream had come true for him. He was pleased that his talents were going to be recognized, but it was also painful. He had a feeling Tohru was going to become something great.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. But I don't wanna go alone. Come with me," he pleaded in a small voice.

"What?"

"Come to France with me."

He hugged him tightly. "Come with me."

Fujishima stroked Tohru's head. He felt like this was something Tohru needed to face alone. "It's only for a year."

"I don't want to be apart from you for a year!"

Fujishima's chest swelled. He wanted to say yes. "But we've gone days without seeing each other before."

"But that's different. This is a whole year. It's not like we can see each other anytime we want."

"I'll come visit you on vacations."

Tohru stayed silent and hugged Fujishima tightly. Fujishima thought he had accepted it, but finally he spoke.

"Do you think I'll always be like this, Fujishima-san?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Do you think I'll always be like this? Or do you think I'll remember the past?"

Fujishima couldn't tell the future.

"I don't want to get my memory back when I'm in France..."

"But the chance has always been there that you would here..."

"It's different. It'll be different if it happens over there," Tohru insisted. "What if I get my memory back tomorrow? There will be two me's—one who loves you and one who hates you. I was wondering who would win the fight. I've only been around for six years, but he was around for twenty-two. What if I lose? I don't want to break up with you." Tohru paused. "So I need you as backup in my fight. I need you to help me."

"If I did that, the old you would get really pissed at me."

"I don't care. I don't care if he gets mad and starts crying!" Tohru sighed. "I'm happiest when I'm with you. I know that." Fujishima kissed him. "But I'm nervous. What if the old me is stronger and wants to break up with you? France is so far away...I just don't want to be alone there if that happens."

Fujishima didn't think there was anything more wonderful than being in the warm, rose-petal bath with Tohru. It made him happy that Tohru loved him so much that he was this worried.

"I know I'm being selfish and I know you have your job. But...I don't wanna be alone. I want to be with you."

"I'll go with you," Fujishima murmured into Tohru's ear. Tohru didn't want to leave him, and he didn't want to be apart from him either. "I'll go with you."

"A-Are you sure?" Tohru whispered. He said it in

such a cute way that Fujishima smiled.

They talked, had sex, talked some more, had some more sex...it all felt so natural.

They got out from the red bath and sat down on the edge. They wiped each other off with pure white bath towels, then got into the clean bed.

Tohru kissed him over and over again. Fujishima opened his eyes and glanced over at the dirtied red bed next to them. Just the sight of it excited him.

Fujishima's stomach growled. Tohru stopped kissing him. Embarrassed, Fujishima clutched his stomach.

"Are you hungry?" Tohru asked.

"I didn't eat dinner."

"What? Are you serious? It was late so I thought you would have eaten by now! I'm sorry, shall we get room service?" Tohru reached for the menu, but Fujishima stopped him.

"No, it's okay."

"But you're hungry."

"I want to eat cake."

Tohru blinked.

"I want to eat the cake you made. I haven't tasted any of it yet."

Tohru went to the sofa and brought the cake over. "But we don't have forks, so you'll just have to bite into it."

It would take a lot of courage for him to shove his face into that whole cake. His face would get covered with frosting, like some old comedy show. But he was hungry and wanted to eat it...

Perhaps Tohru sensed his hesitation, because he plunged one of his hands into the cake. He scooped some of the cake out and held his hand in front of Fujishima. Fujishima was startled, but brought his lips to the cake. He opened his mouth and tasted it. It was delicious.

After Fujishima ate the piece of cake in his hand, Tohru put his hand in the cake again. It was completely ruined. It had been such a beautiful cake, too.

He ate the ruined cake from Tohru's hands. But even just that action sent heat throughout his body. He was excited. He licked Tohru's fingers even after the cake was gone.

Even after Tohru's fingers were clean, he wasn't making a move. He just stared at him with passionate eyes. Fujishima wanted more cake so he scooped some out with his own hand. He got mostly frosting and brought it to his mouth. He wasn't worried about how dirty he got. He chewed and swallowed the sweet cake. He licked the frosting off his fingers.

"Give me some, too," Tohru asked, even though he had two hands of his own. Fujishima scooped up some cake and put his hand in front of Tohru's face. Tohru grabbed his wrist and ate the cake from his hand. He licked at the frosting like a dog lapping up water. His red tongue licked Fujishima's fingers, making his body shake.

"It's like we're in a cave together or something,"

Tohru whispered as they lay on the hotel bed. "Like we're some kind of wild animals."

"Because we're eating with our hands."

"Yeah, but I don't care. I don't care what it looks like. If it's okay with you, it's okay with me."

They set the remains of the cake on the side table, and held each other. They kissed each other, tasting like sweet frosting.

The animals had gotten excited from their meal and spread their legs.

"Mmm..." Fujishima moaned from the stimulus.

"Keishi..."

Fujishima blinked as Tohru murmured his first name. It was the first time he had ever called him that.

"Keishi..."

Fujishima tried to look at him but Tohru wouldn't make eye contact. His ears were red. He looked embarrassed.

"Tohru?"

"Can I call you that from now on? I've wanted to for a while, but I'm so much younger..."

Fujishima thought it was cute that he had been worried about such a thing.

"Yeah, you can call me that."

Passion made his entire body shake. Tohru whispered his name over and over again in his ear. They embraced so tightly they could barely breathe. Fujishima stared out the window at the snow. At this rate they'd be buried in it tomorrow. He felt like it was just like that pure-white birthday cake, covering everything. He wanted to walk through the snowy city tomorrow

morning with the man he loved.

RED FLOWER / END